

November 2018

# Who Buys Sex?

Understanding and  
Disrupting Illicit  
Market Demand



**DEMAND  
ABOLITION**

Research Report

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*This report contains sexual terminology and graphic content about sex buying that may not be appropriate for some audiences.*

## Executive Summary

Much of the research on prostitution and sex trafficking in the US focuses on the **“supply” side** of the market: prostituted and trafficked persons, the great majority of whom are women and girls. While it is critically important to understand supply-side realities and effective approaches to victim services, the other half of the market—the **“demand” side**, defined almost entirely by the actions of men—has been woefully understudied by comparison.

This report fills those gaps in our understanding of demand in the illegal US sex trade, including why some men buy sex and what can be done to reduce this exploitative behavior in the short and long terms. Demand Abolition commissioned a survey completed by 8,201 adult males across the US between December 2016 and January 2017 to address these gaps and more. The study design and questionnaire content were developed by a team of researchers and approved by the University of Portland’s Institutional Review Board.

In our analyses we approach sex buying as a harmful behavior that results from an accumulation of various influences, including: beliefs about sex buying, gendered cultural norms about sexuality, life-course transitions, perceived risk of arrest, and individual attributes such as impulse control. We use a push-pull framework to document the diverse, sometimes competing factors that give rise to sex buying as a cultural phenomenon, and allows us to identify strategies and tactics to confront it.

This report fills those gaps in our understanding of **demand in the illegal US sex trade**, including **why some men buy sex** and what can be done to **reduce this exploitative behavior** in the short and long terms.

# Major Findings

## WHO ARE THEY?

- **Most men have never paid for sex. In fact, our survey finds that only 6.2% of respondents have bought sex within the past 12 months (20.6% do so at least once in their lifetimes).** About half of men who have ever purchased sex did so between two and ten times, and less than one-quarter bought only once.
- **“High-frequency” buyers purchase so often that their actions account for a disproportionately large share of the illegal sex trade.** About 25% of active buyers report purchasing weekly or monthly, and their transactions account for nearly 75% of the market. These buyers are more likely to have started at a young age and with the help or encouragement of others in their social networks.
- **Demographic traits are poor predictors of sex buying.** Race and sexual orientation have almost no profiling power. Buyers are found across the income distribution with one important exception: currently active high-frequency buyers are much more likely than other men to make \$100,000 or more annually.
- **Plenty of would-be sex-buyers are not currently active, including about one in five men who have never bought before but who “could envision buying sex in the future if the circumstances were right.”**

## WHAT DOES THE MARKET LOOK LIKE?

- **On average, US sex buyers spend more than \$100 per transaction.** Based on the recorded spend data and computed annual transactions for different groups of buyers, this survey estimates the annual size of the US commercial sex market at \$5.7 billion.
- **Buyers visit a range of venues and use a similarly diverse number of information channels to purchase sex.** Prominent methods include visiting “massage” brothels—known to law enforcement as Illicit Massage Businesses (IMBs), arranging “dates” online, visiting “adult establishments,” and going to well-known “tracks” for street prostitution. No single location dominates, though high-frequency buyers list IMBs as a frequented venue.
- **Buyers most commonly assume that the age of the last person they paid for sex was early-to mid-twenties.** The data support the finding that prostituted persons in this country are almost entirely women in that range, and disproportionately Black.

## WHY DO THEY BUY SEX?

- **Certain ideologies distinguish sex buyers from other men; they share many attitudes and beliefs about sex and relationships.** Active ones are more tolerant of cheating on a significant other and differ markedly from non-buyers on measures of impulse control.
- **Active buyers are more likely to say that prostitution is a “mostly victimless” crime and are less likely to say that prostitution is a crime “where someone is harmed.”** They are also more likely to say that prostituted persons “enjoy the act of prostitution” and “choose it as a profession.”

- **Buyers and non-buyers hold strikingly different views on masculinity and sex buying.** Non-buyers are much more likely than active ones to say that purchasing someone for sex involves treating females as objects, and that those actions exploit others. Active buyers are very likely to say they are “just guys being guys” or “taking care of their needs.”
- **Many men who have bought sex in the past wish to stop.** About one-third of active buyers “strongly agree” that they do not want to do it again, a sentiment shared by most former buyers.
- **Active buyers value their personal safety, sexual health, and freedom from arrest above most other priorities; they are generally unconcerned about breaking the law but preoccupied by the need to avoid getting caught.** Active and former buyers are much more likely than non-buyers to say police “should not arrest anyone” involved in prostitution. The strongest bloc of male support for legalizing the US sex trade comes from buyers themselves.
- **Only about 6% of men who purchase sex illegally report ever having been arrested for it.** When buyers do perceive that risk, it can lead them to alter their activities. High-frequency buyers are more sensitive than low-frequency buyers to police presence and are more likely to react by shifting to a different location and diminishing their behavior. About one-quarter of buyers “strongly agree” that “the risk of arrest is so high I might stop.”
- **Perceiving a risk of arrest has a diminishing effect on sex buying.** Two factors increase this perception: (1) a buyer’s own arrest history, and (2) the extent to which he shifts his purchasing activities in response to police presence.
- **The main driver of sex buying, “normalized beliefs” about the commercial sex trade, combines interrelated ideas: prostituted women enjoy the act, it is mostly a victimless crime, buyers are merely taking care of their needs, and they are just “guys being guys.”**

## WHAT CAN POLICYMAKERS DO ABOUT IT?

- 1 Move law enforcement’s finite resources away from arresting and adjudicating prostituted persons and towards arresting and adjudicating buyers.
- 2 Make available short-term federal funding programs to support state and local agencies ready to instigate reforms.
- 3 Use mandatory minimum fines from convicted buyers to offset the costs of survivor exit services and law enforcement operations to stop demand.
- 4 Create increasingly severe penalty structures for repeat buyers, ensuring that sanctions are fair and consistent with survivor testimony of the nature of victim impact.
- 5 Counter messages that normalize sex buying through educational and public health interventions.
- 6 Establish employer policies prohibiting sex buying under any circumstances, including activities on company time or with company resources that are related to sex buying.
- 7 Implement targeted prevention campaigns and focus deterrence communications on behavioral “nudges.”

See more on page 32 (Part IV, Policy Recommendations).

# PART I

## Study Background

Much of the research on prostitution and sex trafficking focuses on the “supply” side of the market: prostituted persons,<sup>1</sup> mostly women and girls, many of whom were trafficked. While supply-side realities and effective approaches to victim services require analysis, the other half of the market—the demand side—has been woefully understudied by comparison. This report seeks to fill those gaps in our understanding of demand in the US sex trade, including why some men buy sex and what can be done to reduce sex-buying behavior in the short and long terms.

We deliberately refer to men who buy sex because all available evidence points to this behavior being almost entirely conducted by males (Monto, 2004). We do not dispute evidence that, in rare instances, women have been known to buy sex (Weitzer, 2005). Yet we recognize that the demand side of the commercial sex trade is defined almost entirely by the actions of men.

Few researchers have used data to attempt explanations of why men buy sex (Atchison, 2010; Brewer et al., 2008; Holt et al., 2007; Monto & McRee, 2005). Many more have offered interpretations of sex buying (see Appendix A for a brief literature review). These generally emanate from the lived experiences of prostituted persons and tend to align with one feminist theoretical tradition or another (Monto, 2004; Weitzer, 2005). While important as scholarship, these analyses are not designed to identify the masculine socio-cultural forces that increase, diminish, or maintain demand.

### OUR APPROACH

We recognize that multiple individual and social forces cause sex buying, and close study can uncover a range of explanations. Nevertheless, we recognize it as (masculine) gendered deviant behavior that manifests as an economic market. Practically speaking, we view demand as being shaped by a combination of basic economic forces (e.g., cost and preferences), as well as cultural forces (e.g., gender and social norms).

We use a “momentum framework” to understand fluctuations in sex-buying practices among men whose demand drives the US sex trade. It approaches sex buying as a behavior driven by cumulative, positive nudges that accelerate a person’s trajectory towards the activity. The concept of momentum defines sex buying as a life-course trajectory, avoiding emphasizing singular circumstantial, demographic, or correlative factors.

This approach regards sex buying as a harm-causing behavior that results from the acceleration or deceleration of micro- and macro-level factors including: beliefs about sex buying, gendered cultural norms about sexuality, life-course transitions, perceived risk of arrest, and psycho-social factors such as impulse control. This momentum framework helps document the push and pull factors underlying sex buying as a cultural phenomenon, and easily translates into strategies and tactics to confront and reduce it.

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1 Deciding on terminology to describe persons in the commercial sex trade is a difficult process. No language is value-free, even for research in this field. We recognize people hold many competing, passionate views on the correct words to describe individuals historically labeled as “prostitutes.” We choose to use the term “prostituted person” throughout this report for a simple reason: it is the term preferred by the survivors of the commercial sex trade with whom Demand Abolition has partnered and from whom we have learned since the program’s inception. Respecting their dignity is our highest priority.

## STUDY METHODOLOGY

Research studies that focus on certain types of sex buying, use limited sample sizes, or employ problematic definitions of sex buying leave gaps in our understanding of this activity. Demand Abolition commissioned a survey about sex-buying behavior among 8,201 adult men across the US between December 2016 and January 2017, with the goal of addressing these gaps and more. The study design and questionnaire content were developed by a team of researchers,<sup>2</sup> and approved by the University of Portland's Institutional Review Board. The team chose to field the survey online through a third-party provider, Qualtrics, an independent research services firm, which provided both survey hosting and data collection.

While it is critically important to understand supply-side market forces and effective approaches to victim services, this leaves the other half of the market—the demand side—woefully understudied by comparison.

Choosing to deploy the survey online reflected a desire to balance multiple tradeoffs. Compared to a phone-based or in-person method, respondents are much more likely to disclose sensitive information, particularly about sexual behavior, confidentially and online (see Tourangeau & Yan, 2007 for a review of relevant research). Web-based surveys are also more cost-efficient for collecting large amounts of data, particularly as fewer people participate in phone surveys. However, a major drawback of online studies is the process of selecting potential participants. Whereas phone or in-person surveys can be directed toward different types of probability-based samples (e.g., a simple random sample) of potential respondents, there is no way to do this through online invitations. Instead, the online survey industry uses various types of quota-based sampling procedures to create representative samples for any given study. Typically, convenience samples are crafted based on the geographic and demographic traits of respondents.

The third-party survey sampling firm that collected data for this study recruited US men aged 18 and over from across the country from multiple “panels,” or groups of known prospective survey-takers. Several metro areas were “oversampled” by the research team for purposes unrelated to this report, using a weighting scheme to adjust these communities back to their proper proportion for all findings reported here. The firm recruited potential participants based on demographic quotas for race/ethnicity and age. As a final step in ensuring the representativeness of the sample, we weighted the dataset according to current demographic distributions of adult men in the US as reported by the Census Bureau.

Despite our best attempts, there is no way to avoid completely the possibility that our sample is skewed in one direction or another. Indeed, this is true in varying degrees for all survey-based studies. One major concern: might a participant be more likely, or perhaps less likely, to participate in a survey about sex buying based on his sexual behavioral history? If so, this would cause either an overestimation or underestimation of sex-buying behavior. One way we addressed this was by explaining to potential participants that the survey would cover a variety of sexual and non-sexual topics, and that all data would be completely confidential and, in fact, presented

2 The survey methodology and questionnaire content design team included Simon Hedlin, M.A., of Harvard Law School; Martin Monto, Ph.D., of the University of Portland; and Alex Trouteaud, Ph.D., of Demand Abolition. Alex led the Demand Abolition data analysis and reporting team.

anonymously to the analysis team. Respondents were only shown sex-buying questions after they had already answered a series of innocuous and then mildly sex-related questions. We did not observe a significant drop-off of participants after asking about sex-buying behavior, suggesting that the addition of these questions was unlikely to have dramatically altered the participant base.

We compared responses to our survey with another published report, namely the General Social Survey (GSS), which uses a large, nationwide probability sample—and even asks a couple of questions about sex-buying behavior. Looking only at variables we did not use to weight the data, we found that our sample closely mirrored the marital status and sexual orientation distributions in the GSS, as well as frequency of having sex. However, our sample differed significantly in that it contained: (1) a higher percentage of men who have no children, (2) a smaller percentage of men with “less than high school” educational attainment, (3) a smaller percentage of men who said extramarital sex is “always wrong,” and (4) a smaller percentage of men who say they are “very happy.” These differences could point to a limitation of available participants in online surveys broadly, or self-selection criteria for our survey particularly. These differences also could have occurred by chance.

These differences have simple implications for our estimation of sex-buying behavior: the data from this study constitute one source of many, and probably represent the high end of plausible estimates of sex-buying prevalence. In the GSS sample, 1.2% of men report that they have bought sex within the last year, and 10.1% say they have done it in their lifetimes. Our self-reported data are much higher, at 6.2% and 20.6%, respectively. We know that GSS numbers represent a significant undercount of sex-buying prevalence (Brewer et al., 2000), likely due to administration methods that lead to men feeling less comfortable sharing sexually deviant behavior. Nevertheless, our estimates are still at the highest end of other reports of lifetime sex-buying incidence in the US, which tend to range between 10%-20% (Michael et al., 1994; Monto, 2004; Shively et al., 2012; Sullivan and Simon, 1998). As such, we recommend against treating these estimates as definitive population parameters, and we encourage other researchers to publish similar data using different methodologies for comparison. The value of the data in this study is less about individual point estimates (e.g., sex-buying prevalence or market size), and more about how different men encounter messages and experiences that affect their involvement in the demand side of the US sex trade.



## PART II

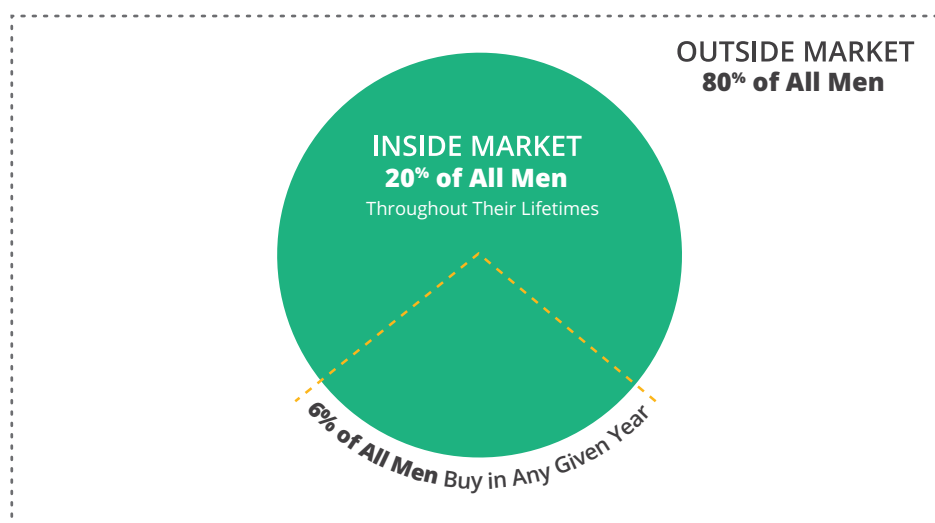
# Findings on Buyers and Demand

### HOW MANY MEN ARE BUYING?

Sex trafficking and prostitution can take place in any section of our country, from small towns to busy truck stops to elite urban neighborhoods. At any time of day, someone can go online and view hundreds of local ads for sex, visit a nearby “massage” brothel, or drive through corridors known for street prostitution. Wherever there is evidence of “supply” in the commercial sex trade, there must also be a pool of demand to necessitate it. Our survey collected data that help us explore the demand side of the market and discern how men who buy sex—currently or in the past—differ from the male population at large.

Most men have never paid for sex. In fact, our survey finds that only 6.2% of respondents have bought it within the past 12 months, and just 20.6%<sup>3</sup> enter the illegal sex-buying market at least once in their lifetimes (Appendix A). Across multiple studies, the percentage of US men actively engaged in sex buying within a 12-month period ranges in the low-to-mid single digits, and the estimates of men who have ever bought in their lifetimes is between 10%-20%.<sup>4</sup> Most men who have ever purchased sex did so 2-5 times, with about 25% having purchased 10 times or more (Appendix B).

FIGURE 1



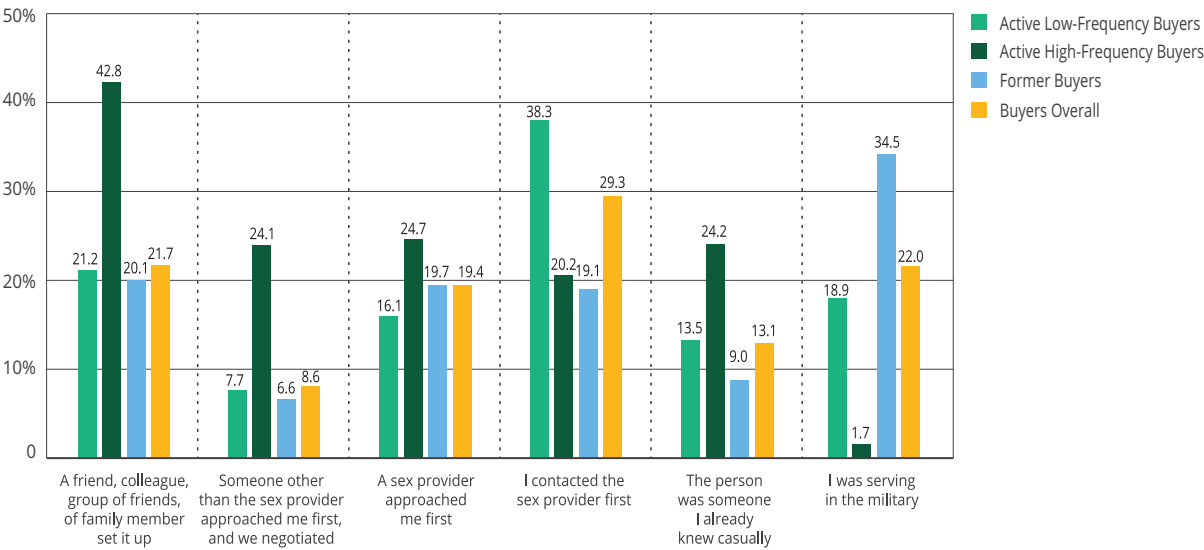
Not all buyers who are actively involved in the US sex trade participate equally. We refer to men who reported currently buying sex weekly or monthly as “**high-frequency buyers**” throughout the remainder of the report. Men who buy at least once per year, or quarterly on average, are labeled “**low-frequency buyers**.” Separately, high-frequency and low-frequency buyers may be “active” or “former” based on their current involvement.<sup>5</sup>

- 3 To measure lifetime sex-buying behavior we asked, “Thinking about the time since your 18th birthday, have you ever paid someone in order to have sex with them, including oral sex, hand jobs, vaginal or anal sex, or some other form of person-to-person sexual act?” Later we asked men who responded affirmatively to this question how many times they have done so within the last 12 months.
- 4 See the methods section of this report for a detailed discussion about the estimates in this study, their limitations, and how and why they might be similar to or different from those in other studies.
- 5 We define **active buyers** as those who have paid for sex two or more times this year; or, just once this year but with a history of sex buying and an intent to buy again. Active buyers “strongly agree” they would buy again in the future if the circumstances are right. **Former buyers** either have not bought sex in the past year and “disagree” when asked if they would buy sex in the future, or merely have not paid for sex within the last six years.

High-frequency buyers are more likely to have started at a young age, and with the help or encouragement of others in their social networks. These people are far more likely than others to have had their first paid sex experience initiated by “a friend, colleague, group of friends, or family member,” typically by the time they turned 21.

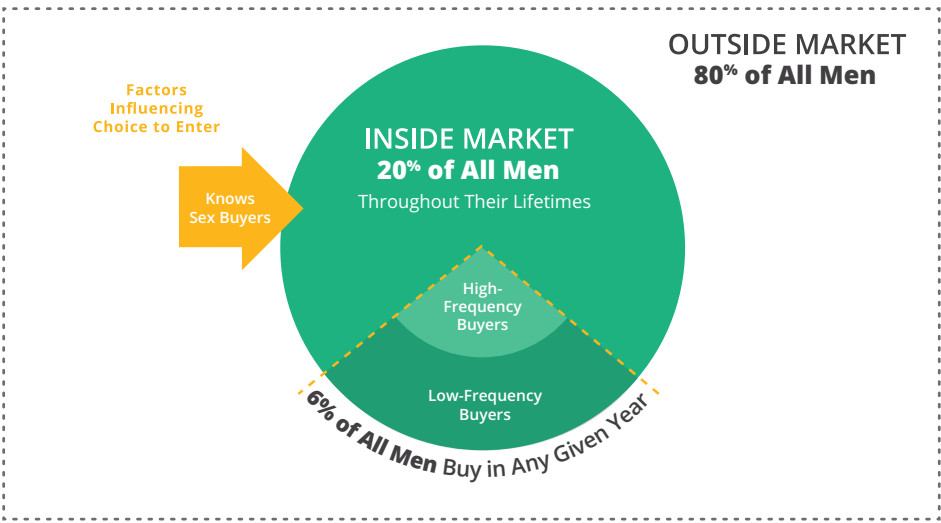
FIGURE 2

### Circumstances of Buyer's First Paid Sex Experience



Nearly one in five high-frequency buyers had his first paid-sex experience while he was legally a juvenile (Appendix B, Figure C). Our findings show sex buying not only as an individual behavior, but also as a cultural phenomenon that can be passed down generationally and reinforced by social networks that accept sex buying as normal.

FIGURE 3

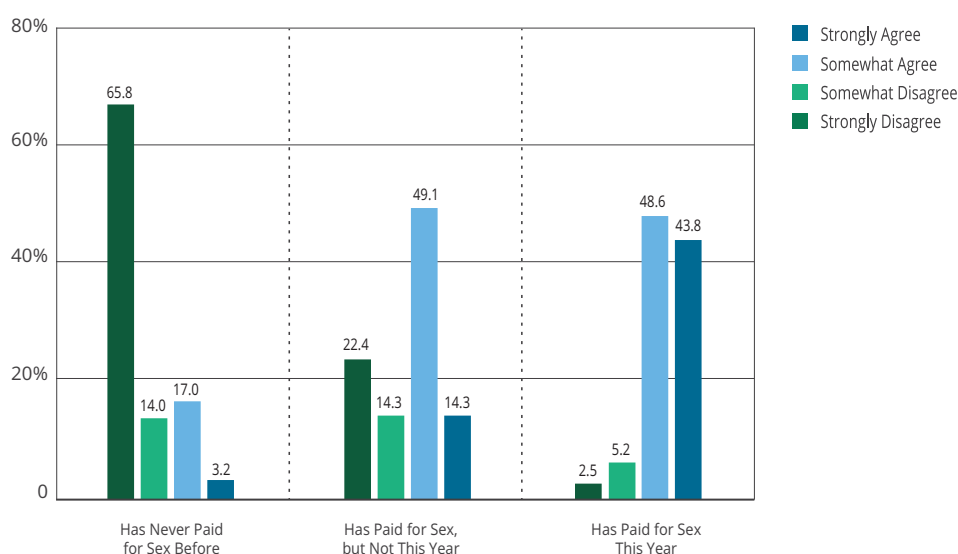


## POTENTIAL BUYERS

We recognize that, as in any market, illegal sex buying is dynamic—constantly evolving and changing in response to external forces. Our survey asked both buyers and non-buyers whether they could “envision buying sex in the future if the circumstances were right.” Numerous would-be sex-buyers are not currently active, including about one in five men who have never paid for sex (as Figure 4 details, 20.2% of these men “somewhat agree” or “strongly agree” they could envision buying sex in the future). In later sections, we will delve deeper into what these circumstances are, and how they reinforce the experiences and beliefs associated with sex-buying behavior.

FIGURE 4

“I could envision buying sex, in the future, if the circumstances were right.”



## INSIDE THE US SEX MARKET, ACCORDING TO BUYERS

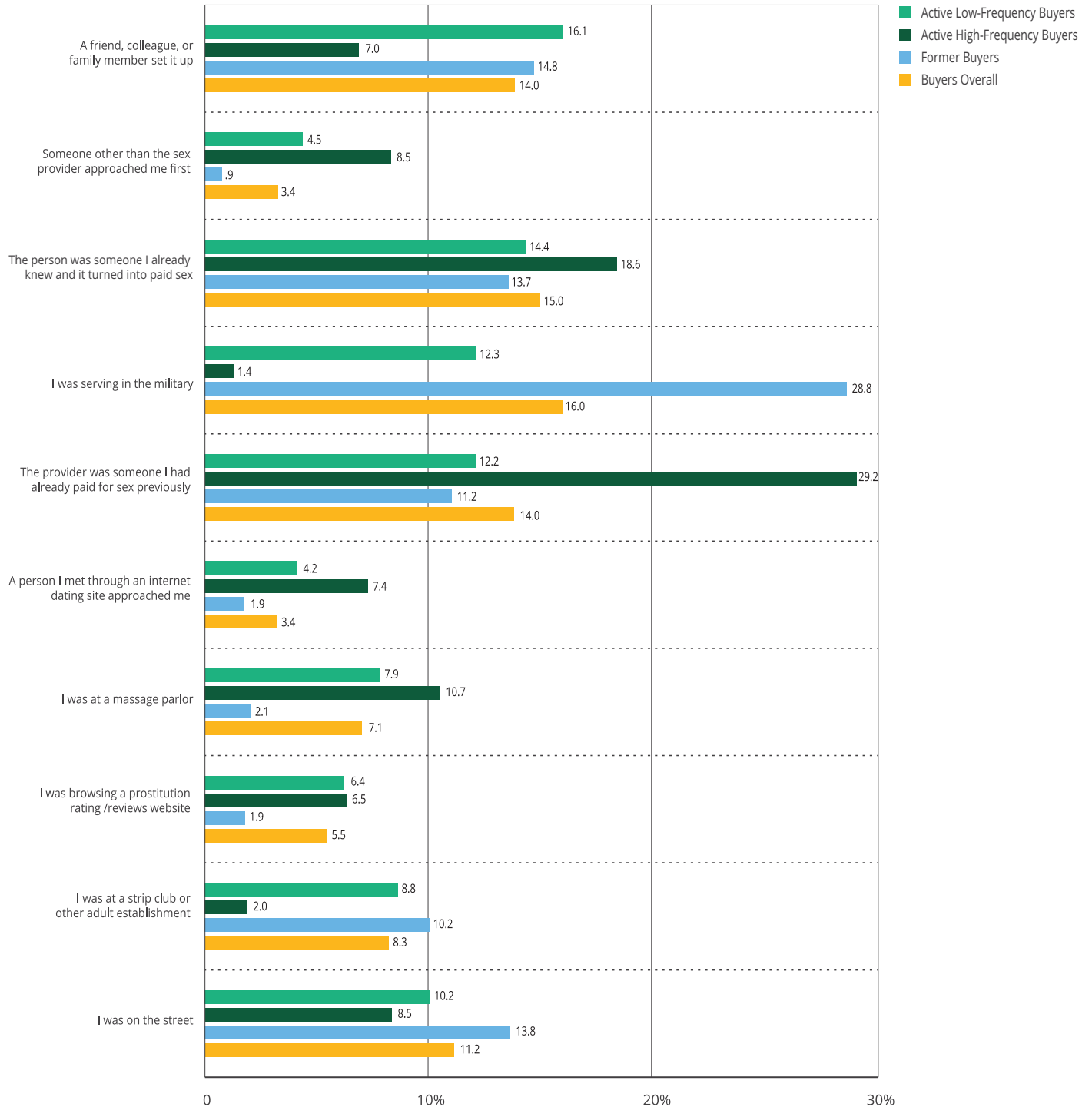
Many studies and journalistic accounts attempt to describe aspects of the illicit sex trade in the US, such as the most common venues and the most desired attributes of prostituted persons. Our survey is one of the first to offer a snapshot through data provided directly by the buyers themselves. Our research digs deeply into the views of the 20% of men who have purchased sex to discover how they experience this underground market, including how much they pay to sustain it.

## VENUES

Buyers visit a range of venues and use a similarly diverse number of information channels to purchase sex. Prominent methods include visiting illicit “massage” brothels—known to law enforcement as Illicit Massage Businesses (IMBs), arranging “dates” online, visiting strip clubs or adult establishments, and going to well-known “tracks” for street prostitution. No one location dominates, though high-frequency buyers list IMBs as a favorite venue, while street-level sex buying and buying during military service are much more common experiences for former buyers.

FIGURE 5

## Circumstances of Buyer's Most Recent Paid Sex Transaction

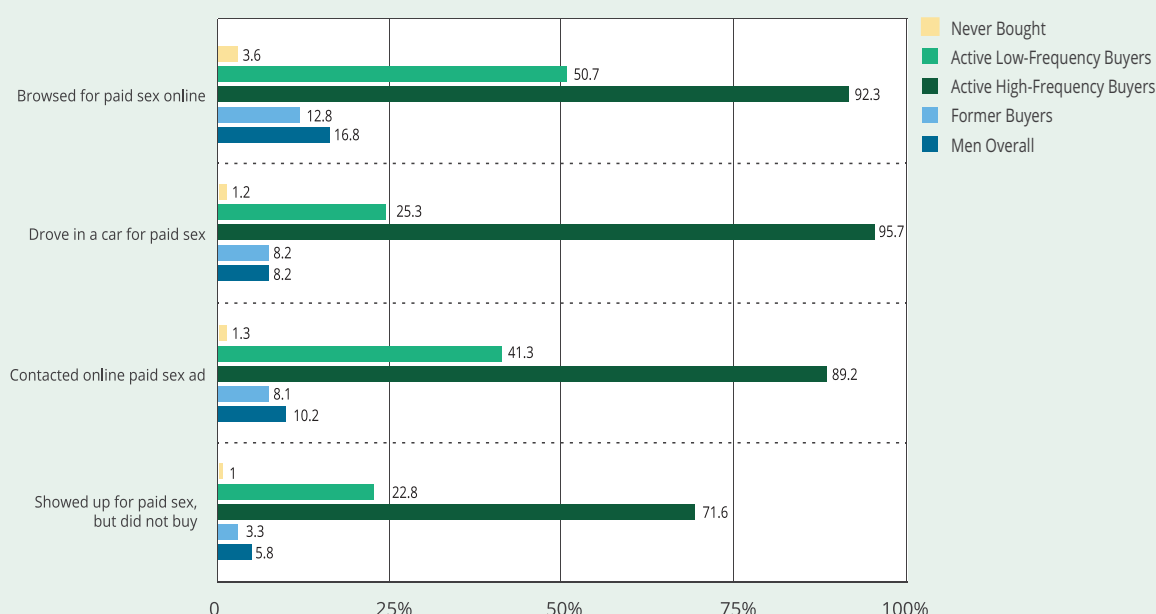


## The Internet and Sex Buying

It is widely assumed that most sex-trafficking and prostitution activities have moved online. While Figure 5 might suggest that few buyers use online ads to arrange paid sex transactions, Figure 6 brings the role of the internet into sharper focus. Most buyers have recently browsed online ads for paid sex, and nearly the same percentage have taken the next step of contacting a person through an ad.

FIGURE 6

### Paid Sex “Shopping Behavior” in Past 12 Months

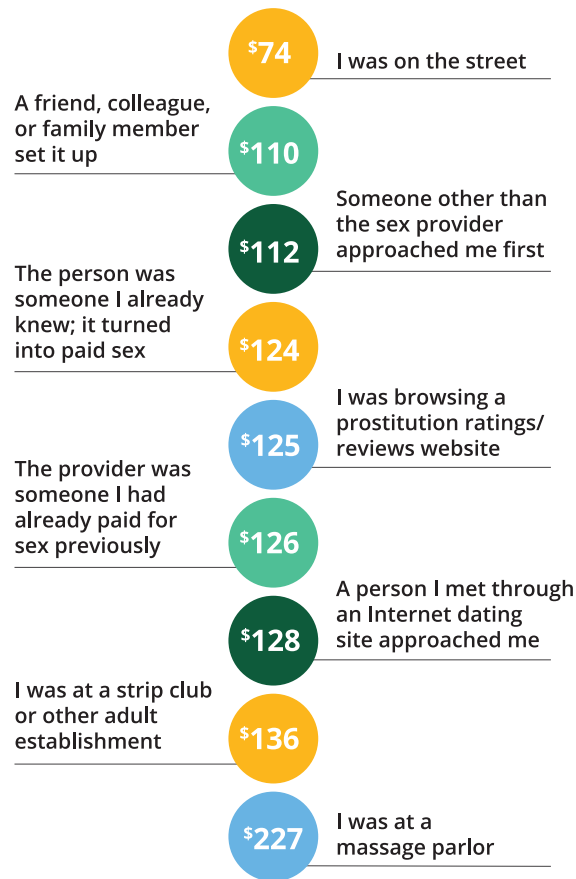


These data suggest the internet plays a prominent role in perpetuating the sex trade, at the very least providing buyers with a robust information source for conducting “research” prior to transacting. The numbers also demonstrate that it’s rare for buyers to turn to online ads every time—or even most times—they want to buy. Nevertheless, online advertising is an integral part of marketing the illegal sex trade. Online ads and review boards play an indirect role in promoting transactions, and on occasion directly connect a buyer with his next transaction.

The data reveal that venue can affect the price of purchased sex. Consistent with previous studies, street-level transactions are, on average, significantly lower than all other venues (Figure 7). Surprisingly high average prices are paid at IMBs, even after “extreme” price values reported by buyers were excluded from analysis. This finding requires further study. An interesting way to think about the average price of paid sex transactions is to contrast these amounts to the fines judges typically levy against convicted sex buyers. In many jurisdictions, fines rarely surpass \$100, or less than the average price for paid sex.

FIGURE 7

## Average (Mean) Cost of Buyer's Most Recent Paid Sex Transaction



Many buyers, especially high-frequency ones who purchase weekly or monthly, say their most recent transaction was with the same person they paid the time before, indicating that many transactions are with “known” prostituted persons (Figure 7). Similarly, a significant percentage of transactions were with someone the buyer “...already knew, and it turned into paid sex.” This finding is consistent with the literature suggesting some sex buyers consider paid sex behavior part of “normal,” relational sex (Atchison, 2010; Monto, 2004). What to non-buyers is a clear demarcation of prostitution activity—giving money to another person in exchange for sex—might to a buyer appear to be part of developing a “romantic” relationship with that person. We must consider this when estimating prostitution incidence, since some buyers don’t think of all paid sex activity as prostitution. It also speaks to how sex buying is gendered normative behavior for some men.

# Prostituted Persons, According to Buyers

Buyers' best guesses at the age range of the last person they paid for sex suggest most transactions are with prostituted persons in their early-to-mid-twenties (Appendix B, Figure D). Most said the person was between the ages of 21 and 25, and former buyers were more likely to estimate the person was even younger. Buyers were most likely to report that their most recent paid sex transaction was with a person they describe as White (44.9%), rather than Black (19.1%). Yet non-Hispanic Black persons comprise 13% of the US population, and therefore are significantly overrepresented at a rate of roughly 1.5x in the race data (Appendix B, Figure E).

High-frequency buyers are more likely to have recently paid for sex with a Black prostituted person. While most paid sex transactions involve female prostituted persons, about one in five high-frequency buyers most recently purchased sex from a male (Appendix F). Our buyer data supports the finding that US prostituted persons are almost entirely women in their young-to-mid-twenties, and disproportionately Black.

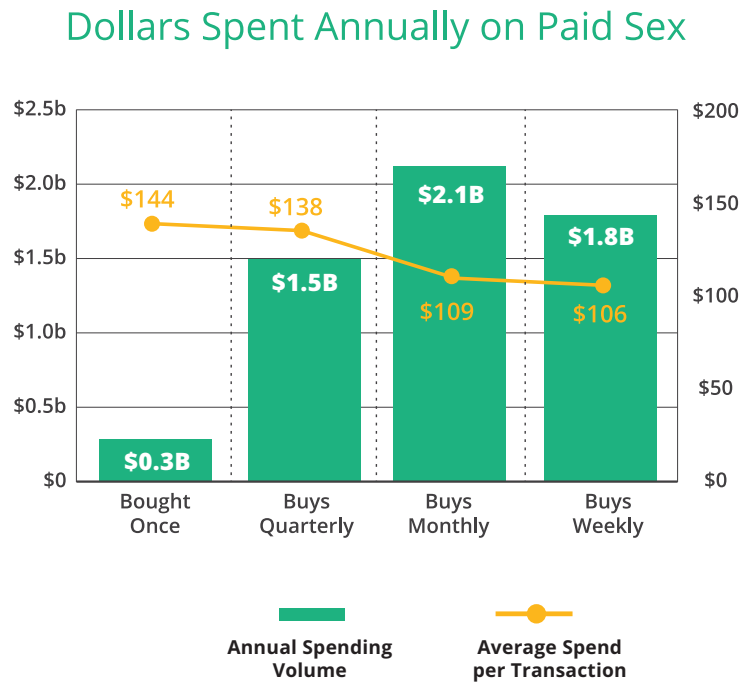
## MARKET SIZE

Economic markets are defined by transactions, not by persons. To better understand what the illegal sex market looks like, and who is disproportionately driving demand in it, we need to examine who is responsible for how many transactions. While this impersonal way of thinking risks downplaying the activity's very real harms, it represents an honest accounting of how much harm is caused and by whom. From the standpoint of a prostituted person, cumulative trauma is perhaps better measured by survived exploitative transactions, rather than unique individual exploiters.

Our research shows that, while the size of the illegal sex industry in the US is significant, it is fueled by a relatively small number of men. Sex buyers in the US spend more than \$100 per transaction on average, and men who purchase sex least often pay the highest prices on average (Figure 8). Based on average spend data and computed annual transactions for different groups of buyers, this survey estimates the US sex market at \$5.7 billion each year.<sup>6</sup>

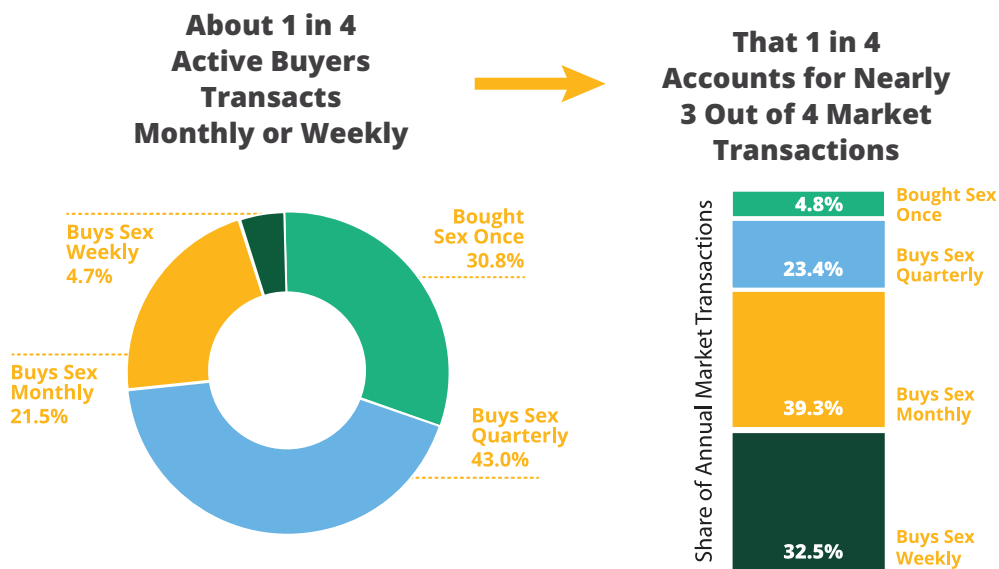
6 This figure is consistent with mathematically-robust estimates produced through other methodologies, including a 2014 study by the Urban Institute which measured the size of the sex trade in eight US metro areas. Recently, Polaris estimated the market size of commercial sex in US illicit massage businesses to be \$2.5 billion based on recent academic research, suggesting this survey's estimate of \$5.7 billion for the overall market might be low.

FIGURE 8



Additionally, the more frequently a buyer pays for sex, the less he spends per transaction. When we factor in the percentage of men in each frequency group, and the number of transactions each group makes, it is clear that men who buy most often account for the lion’s share of the overall market. **While about 25% of active sex buyers report purchasing weekly or monthly, those transactions account for nearly 75% of the market** (Figure 9). About one in four buyers purchase *at least* every other month. Nearly half of active buyers purchase between two and five times per year.

FIGURE 9





## A FREQUENCY-BASED BUYER TYPOLOGY

How often a buyer transacts can radically affect how much responsibility he bears for the shape of the commercial sex trade. Recognizing this, we use a simple typology, summarized in Figure 10, to compare the experiences of these different groups of buyers. As we will show later, this typology unlocks key findings about why men increase (accelerate) or decrease (decelerate) their sex-buying behavior.

We first divide men into three groups based on whether they have **never bought**, are **former buyers** no longer active, or are **active buyers** whose actions currently define the demand side of the US sex trade. Active buyers are further separated into **high-frequency buyers** and **low-frequency buyers**, based on how much market activity is attributable to their actions.

The obvious next question is, “Do these groups of men differ in ways that might explain *why* they do or do not pay for sex?” For a variety of reasons, previous research has tended to focus on demographic differences among sex buyers. In this study we can look far beyond demographics to help answer this essential research question.

FIGURE 10

### Sex-Buyer Typology

TYPOLOGY	Non-Buyers	Former Buyers	Active Low-Frequency Buyers	Active High-Frequency Buyers
<b>BUYING BEHAVIOR</b>	Has never bought sex, and ‘strongly disagrees’ he ever could.	It has been at least 6 years since he last bought sex; or, has a more recent history of low-frequency buying and ‘strongly disagrees’ he ever could again.	Has bought sex 2-5 times this year; or, just once but with a history of buying and an intent to buy again.	Has bought 6+ times this year.
<b>LIKELIHOOD OF BUYING IN THE FUTURE</b>	None; category excludes the 20.2% of men who have never bought sex but might in the future.	28.9% say they might buy sex in the future.	95.9% say they might buy sex in the future.	97.4% say they might buy sex in the future.
<b>PERCENT OF MARKET TRANSACTIONS</b>	0%	0%	28.2%	72.8%

While about 25% of active sex buyers report purchasing weekly or monthly, those transactions account for nearly 75% of the market.

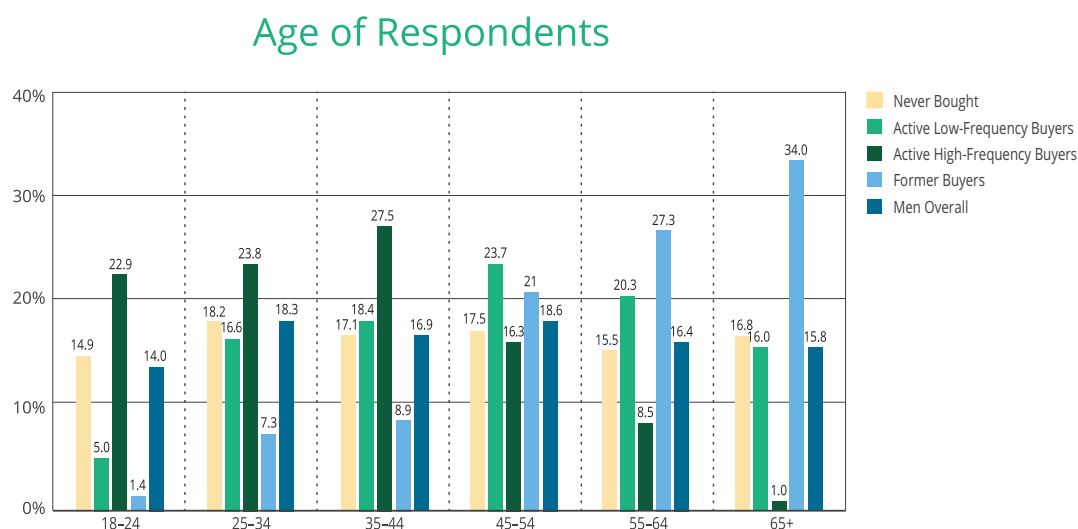
# PART III

## Findings on Sex-Buying Reduction and Prevention

### DEMOGRAPHIC INFLUENCES ON SEX BUYING

Policymakers, advocates, and practitioners pursuing demand-reduction approaches to ending prostitution (and by extension sex trafficking) often look for common factors that might indicate the likelihood of a person being or becoming a sex buyer. Our research shows that demographic traits tend to be poor predictors. Age, more than other demographic variables, is somewhat associated with sex buying, as **former buyers** are more likely to be older, and **high-frequency buyers** are more likely to be younger (Figure 11). However, **low-frequency buyers** are evenly distributed across age ranges, as are men who have never paid for sex.

FIGURE 11



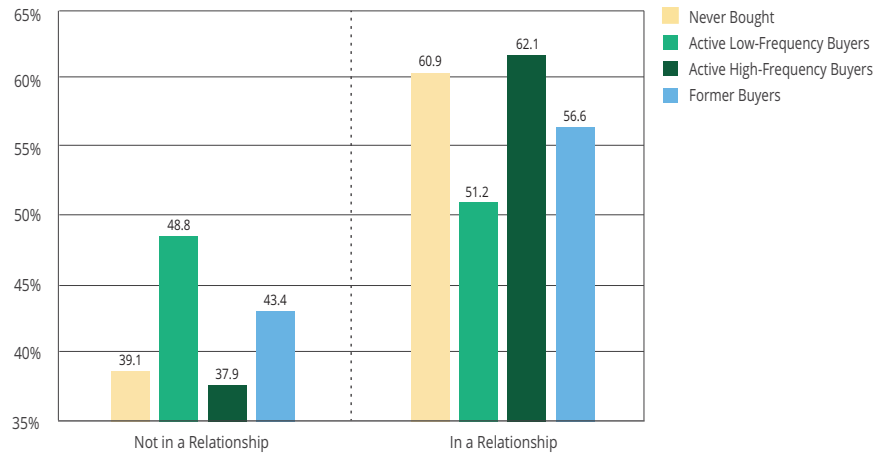
Race, sexual orientation, and marital status show modest statistical relationships with sex buying (Appendix B, Figures H-J). Race has almost no relationship with sex buying; however, Black men are disproportionately represented among **active high-frequency buyers**, though Black men still comprise less than half of this buyer type. Sexual orientation of buyers generally mirrors that of the male population at large, except that **active high-frequency buyers** are slightly more likely to self-identify as bisexual. This finding is consistent with other data in our study indicating that this group of buyers is more likely to have recently paid for sex with a male prostituted person (Appendix B, Figure I).

**Active buyers** are less likely to be married than **former buyers** and **non-buyers**, as seen in Appendix B, Figure J. Nevertheless, over one-third of **active buyers** are married. Over half of active buyers have children under age 18 in the home (Appendix B, Figure K).

**Active high-frequency buyers** are much more likely to report they are in a romantic relationship than are **active low-frequency buyers** (Figure 12), yet they are less likely to report being married. This curious pattern reinforces literature suggesting buyers consider paid sex behavior part of “normal” relational sex, thus demonstrating how the activity becomes gendered normative behavior for some men.

FIGURE 12

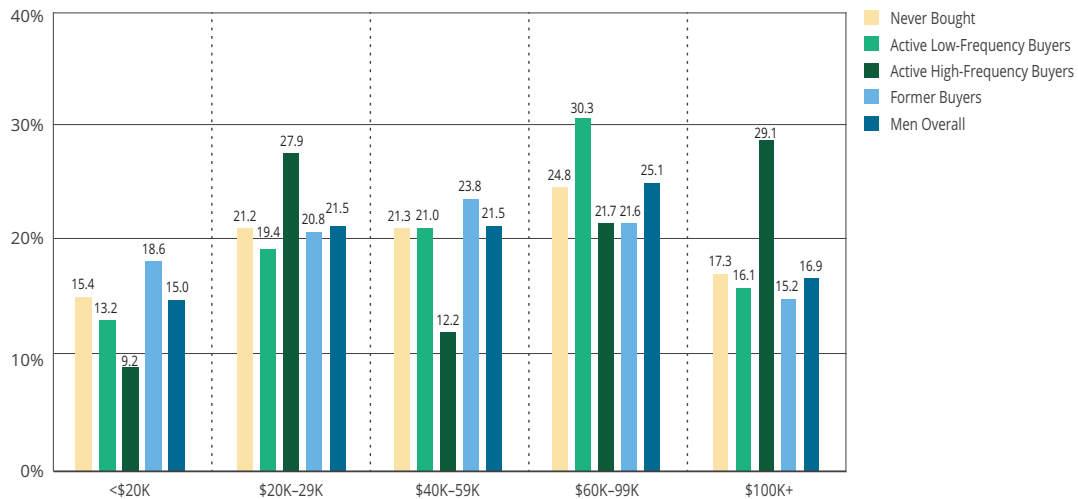
### Current Relationship Status of Respondents



In general, sex buying is only weakly related to income, education level, or political ideology. Buyers are found across the income distribution with one important exception: **active high-frequency buyers** are much more likely than other men to make \$100,000 or more annually (Figure 13).

FIGURE 13

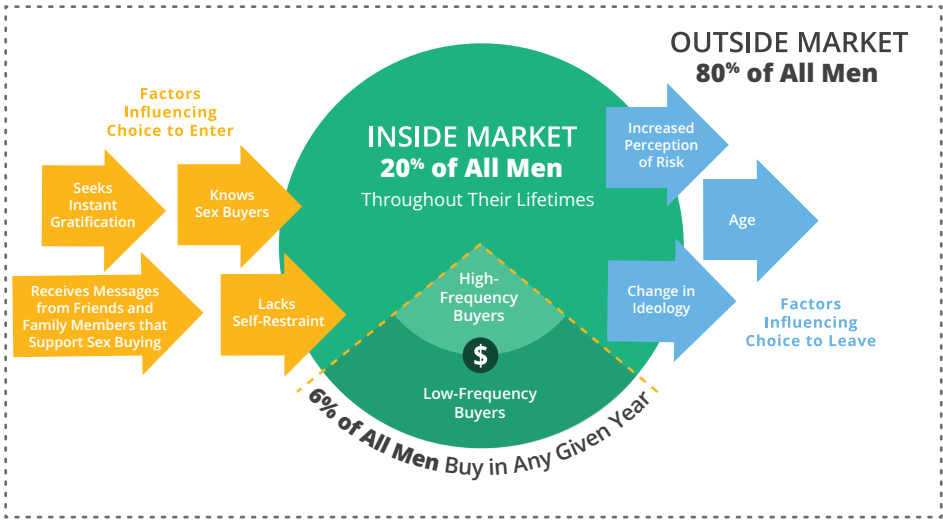
### Annual Household Income of Respondents



The data show no meaningful relationship between education levels and sex buying (Appendix B, Figure L). Men with all amounts of educational attainment are equally likely to pay for sex. There is no one political leaning associated with sex buyers, either, though **active buyers** and **former buyers** are more likely to describe their political views as “liberal” or “very liberal.” Additionally, however, a disproportionate number of **active high-frequency buyers** describe their views as “very conservative” (Appendix B, Figure M).

While research reveals plenty of minor demographic differences among groups of sex buyers, these do very little to predict who is a sex buyer and why. We cannot write a set demographic profile for a sex buyer. He could be any age or race, earn at any income level, or be in any type of relationship.

FIGURE 14



## IDEOLOGICAL INFLUENCES ON SEX BUYING

Whereas demographic data fall short in developing profiles of sex buyer types, ideological data can be quite effective. Sex buyers share many attitudes and beliefs about sex and relationships. For example, **active buyers**, and to a lesser extent **former buyers**, are far more tolerant of cheating on a spouse or significant other, as demonstrated in Figure 15. This probably explains why **active buyers** are more likely than all other groups to have cheated or had an affair in the last year (Figure 16). Across both measures, **active high-frequency buyers** register stronger negative views than **active low-frequency buyers**.

FIGURE 15

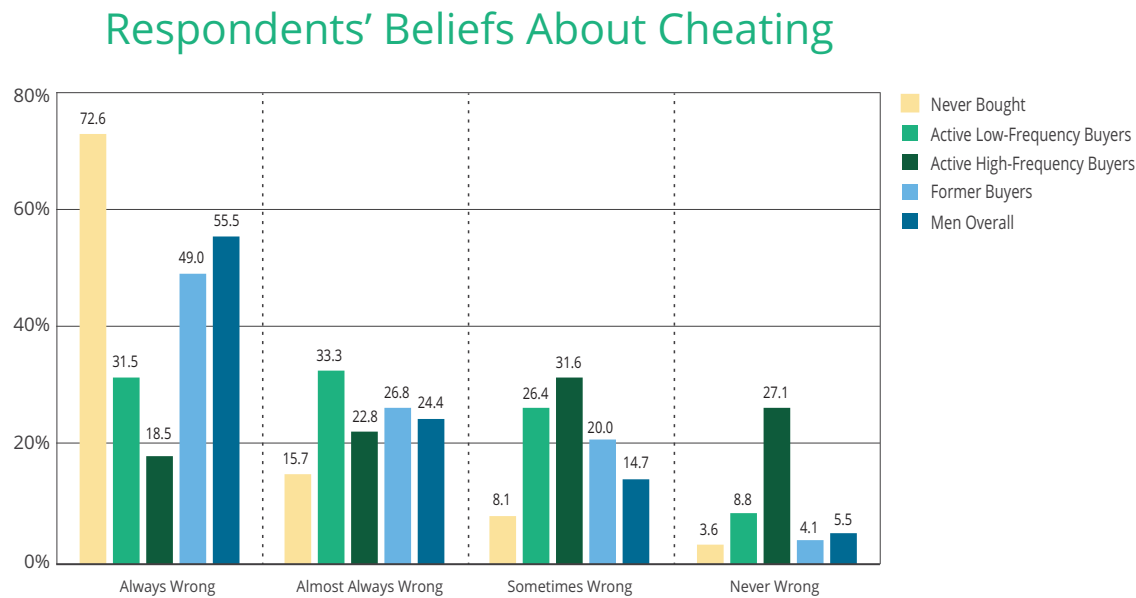
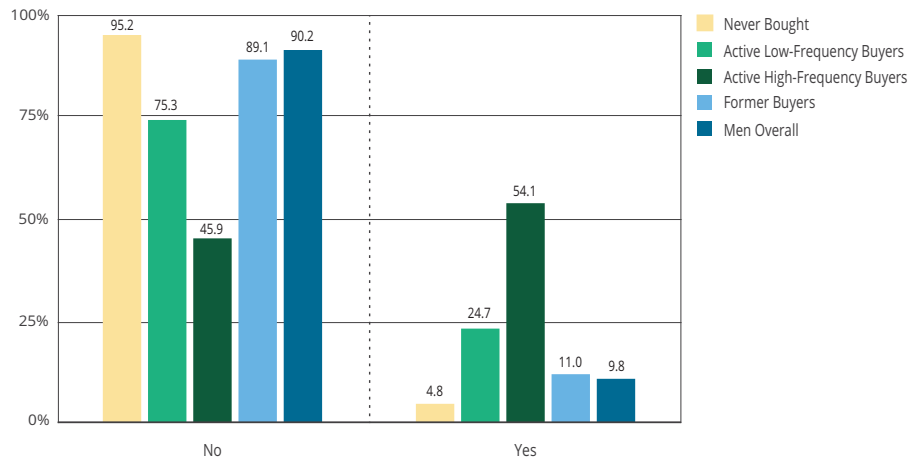


FIGURE 16

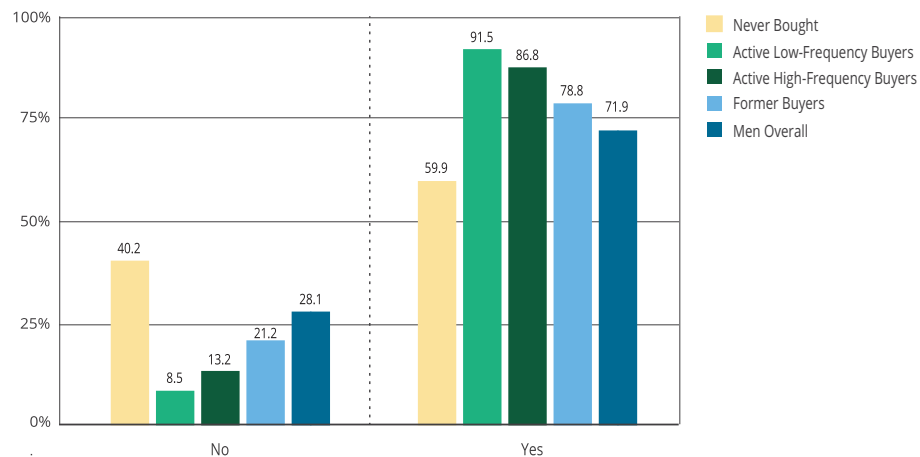
### Respondents Who Had an Affair or Cheated Within the Past 12 Months



Advocates often connect consumption of pornography with sex-buying behavior. According to our research, **active** and **former buyers** are much more likely than **non-buyers** to have viewed porn in the past year, though it should be noted that over half of non-buyers did so as well (Figure 17). This relationship is addressed in greater detail later, when we discuss “acceleration” forces.

FIGURE 17

### Respondents Who Viewed Porn Within the Past 12 Months

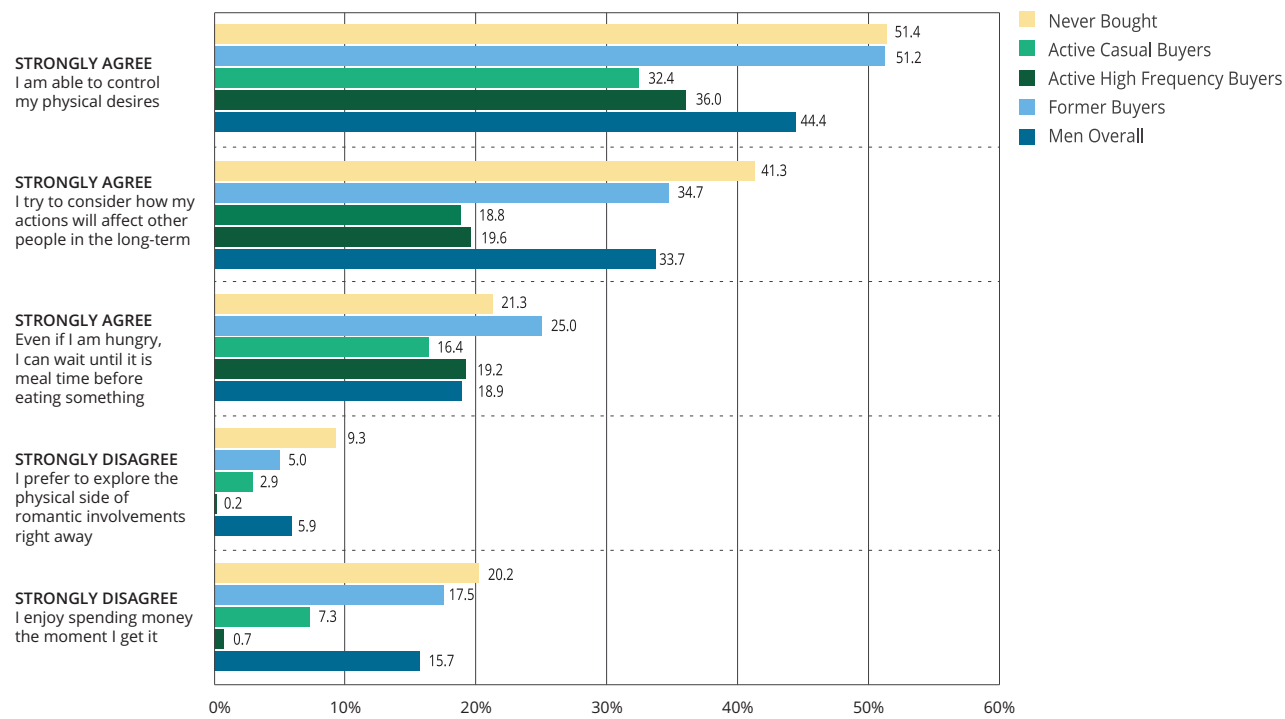


Men who buy sex are about as sexually active as **non-buyers**, with one important exception: **active high-frequency buyers** are much more likely than all other groups, including **active low-frequency buyers**, to report having sex multiple times per week (Appendix B, Figure N). They are also more likely than all other groups to report contracting a sexually transmitted infection in the last year, suggesting they adhere less to safe sex practices (Appendix B, Figure O).

**Active buyers** might engage in more sexually promiscuous behavior not simply because of a heightened libido, but due to a relative inability to wait for satisfaction. We find that **active buyers** differ markedly from **former buyers** and **non-buyers** on measures of impulse control and delayed gratification. We included a series of such questions, originally developed and validated as part of the Delaying Gratification Inventory (Hoerger, Quirk & Weed, 2011). Figure 18 shows that across each of the five tested statements, **active high-frequency buyers** and **active low-frequency buyers** indicate lower levels of impulse control, and **former buyers** more closely resemble **non-buyers**.

FIGURE 18

Measure of Impulse Control and Delayed Gratification

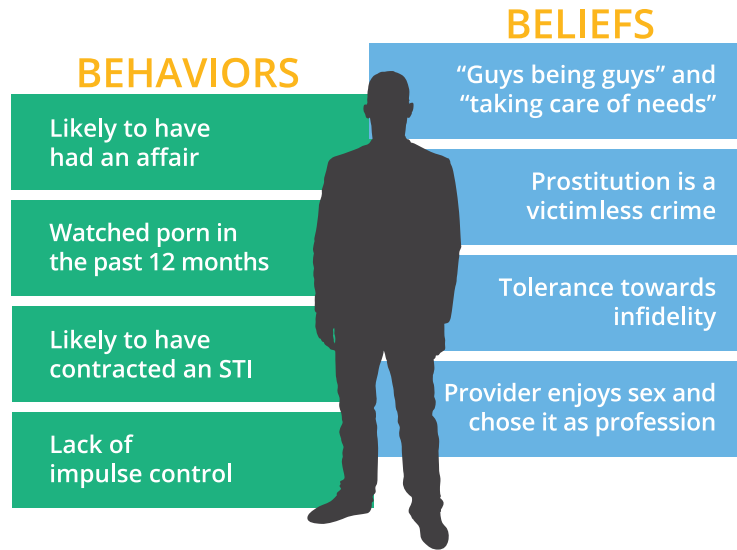


Sex buyers share many similar attitudes and beliefs about sex and relationships.

While impulse control and delayed gratification are important to understanding sex-buyer behavior, some of the most insightful findings arose from questions probing buyers' beliefs about prostitution.

FIGURE 19

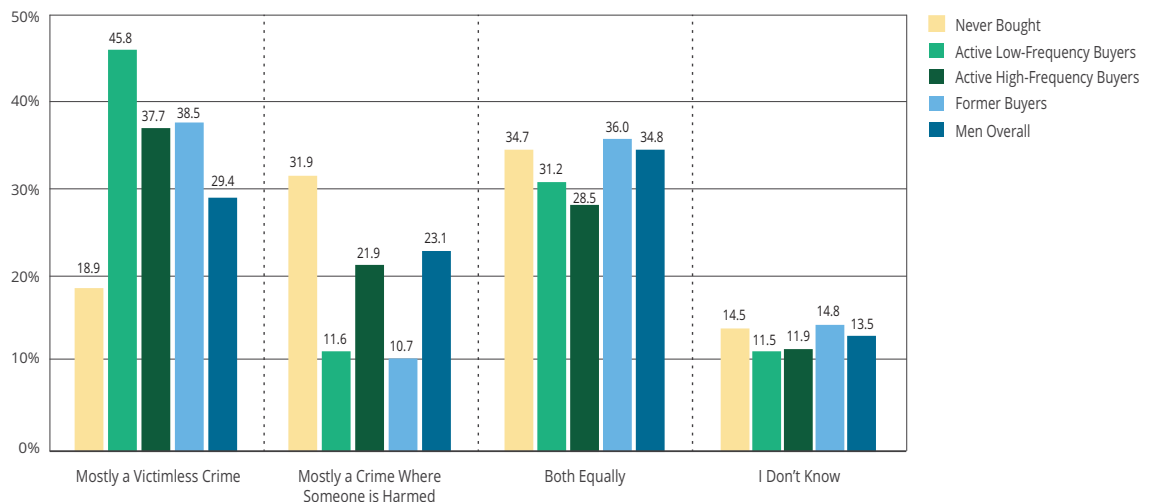
## Beliefs and Behaviors Associated with Sex Buying



**Active buyers** are far more likely than **non-buyers** to say that prostitution is a “mostly victimless” crime, and are less likely to say that prostitution is a crime “where someone is harmed” (Figure 20).

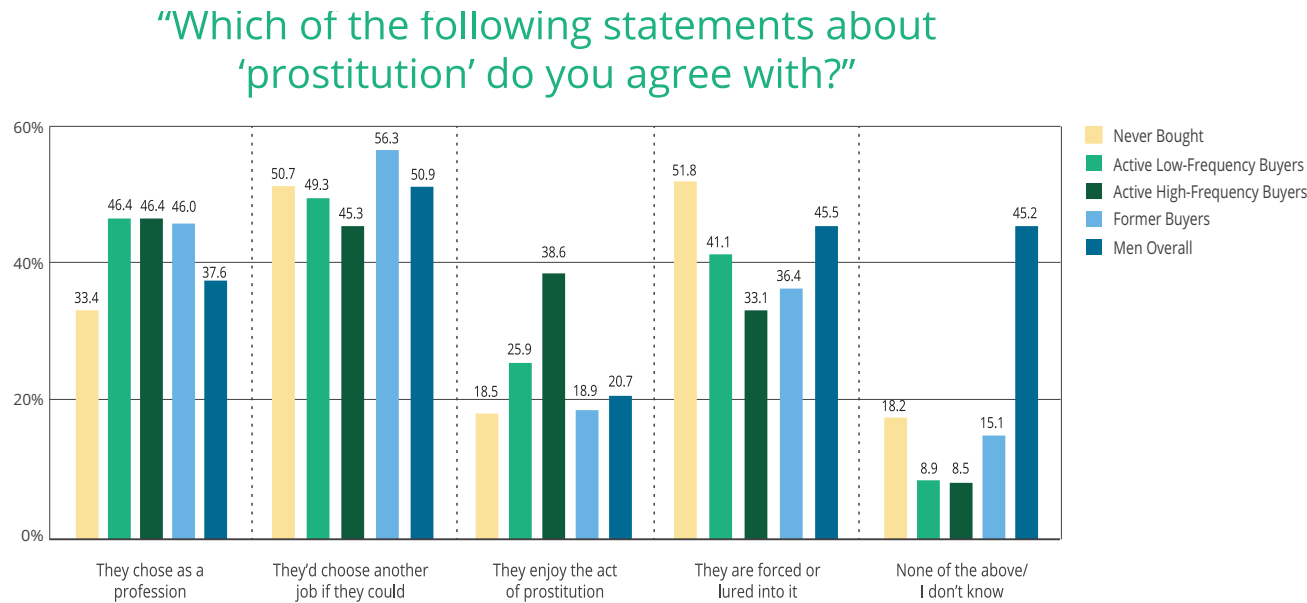
FIGURE 20

## “Do you believe prostitution is a victimless crime, or mostly a crime where someone is harmed?”



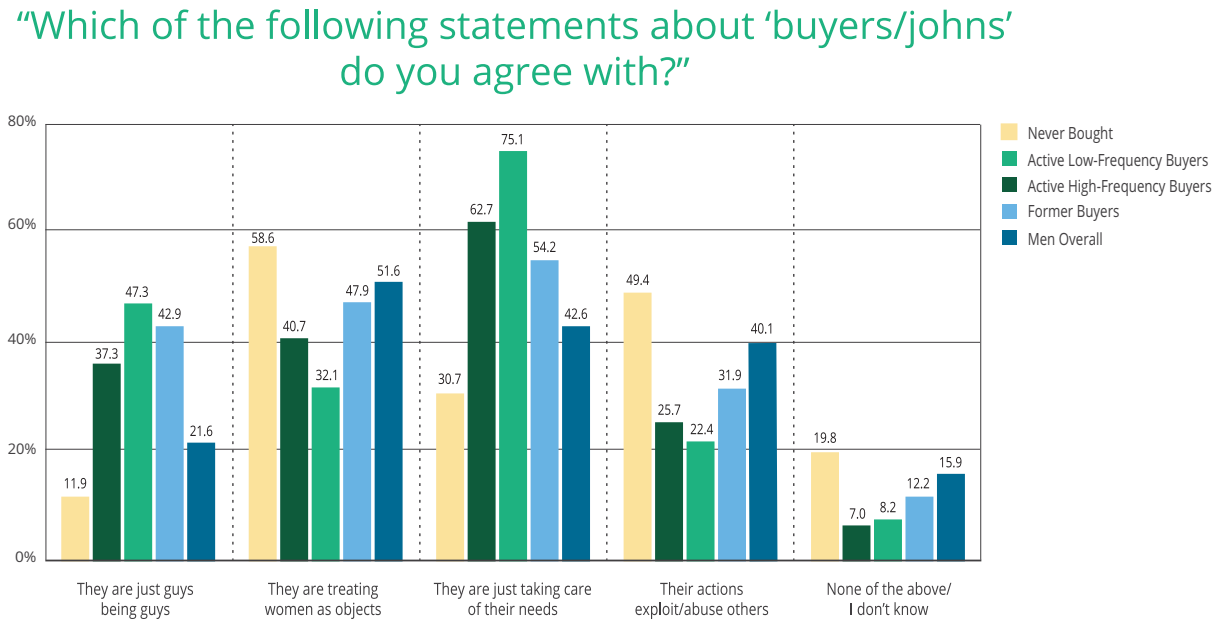
Going further, **active buyers** are more likely than both **non-buyers** and **former buyers** to believe that prostituted persons “enjoy the act of prostitution” (Figure 21). **Active buyers** are less likely to believe that people in prostitution are “forced or lured into the trade,” and more likely to say that prostituted persons “choose it as a profession.”

FIGURE 21



**Buyers** and **non-buyers** hold strikingly different views on masculinity and sex buying (Figure 22). **Non-buyers** are much more likely than **active buyers** and **former buyers** to say that purchasing someone for sex involves treating women as objects, and that their actions exploit others. **Active buyers** are especially likely to say they are “just guys being guys” or “taking care of their needs.”

FIGURE 22





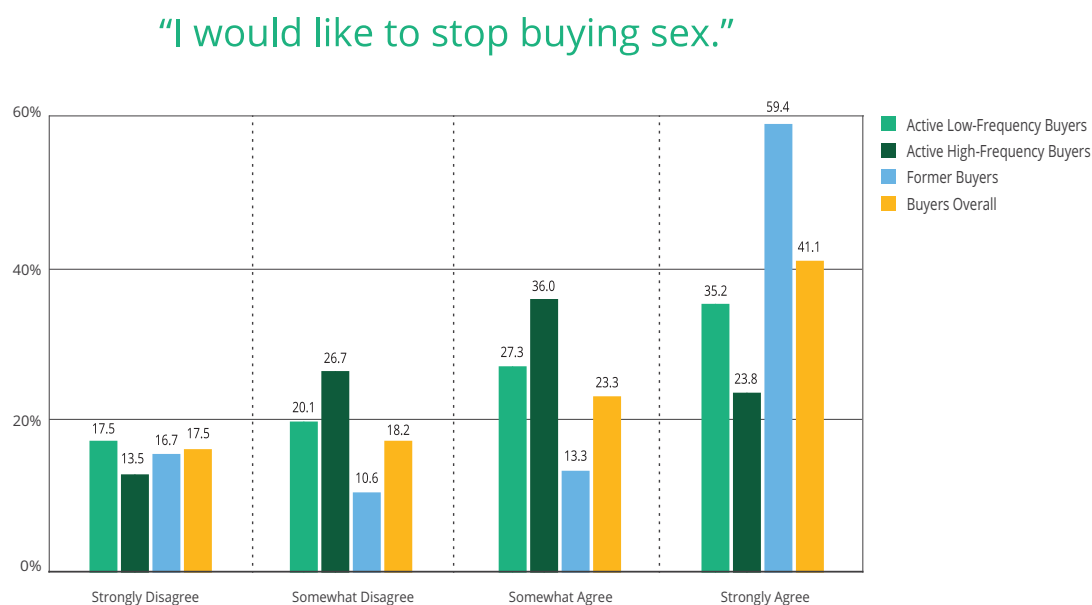
Compared to meager demographic differences among categories of sex buyers, we observed clear distinctions across a variety of attitudes and behaviors associated with sexual and relational ideologies, painting a clearer portrait of the different types of sex buyers. In the next section we will consider the logical next step of this analysis: factors that reduce and prevent sex-buying behavior.

## RISK AND ACCOUNTABILITY INFLUENCES ON SEX BUYING

As we just observed, men who perpetuate prostitution hold deep beliefs that also justify their behavior. Given this, it is tempting to be cynical about whether demand for paid sex can be reduced. However, the old adage that “prostitution is the oldest profession” ignores how sex buying rates vary dramatically across cultures and over time, and evidence presented in the introduction of this report demonstrates that sex buying is generally on the decline in the US. Findings from this section of the report provide insight into how and why men reduce (decelerate) sex-buying behavior, and sometimes stop altogether.

First we should acknowledge that many men who have bought sex in the past do not intend to repeat the behavior. About one-third of **active low-frequency buyers** “strongly agree” that they want to stop (Figure 23), a sentiment shared by twice as many former buyers.

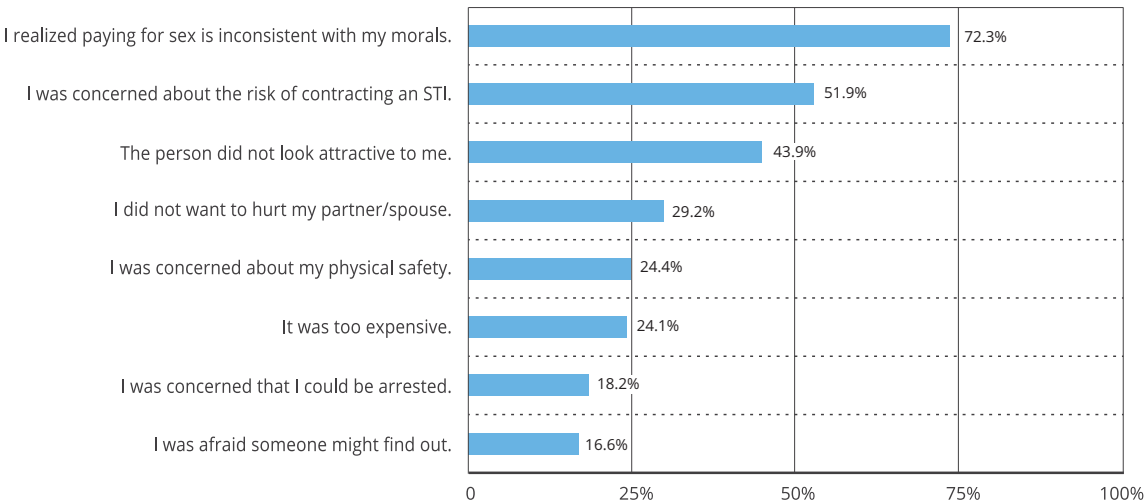
FIGURE 23



The reasons why any person stops sex buying permanently can be complex and multi-layered. **Former buyers** give us some insight into this process through the reasons they cite for walking away from previous sex-buying opportunities (Figure 24). The most prevalent logic former buyers offer is, “I realized that paying for sex is inconsistent with my moral beliefs.” This finding once again reinforces the central importance played by belief systems in determining behavior. Far fewer former buyers said they were concerned they might get arrested, a finding which we will interpret with further data below.

FIGURE 24

## Why Former Buyers Walked Away from Sex-Buying Opportunities



Our survey assessed the top barriers to engaging in further sex-buying behavior and found that, for the most part, buyers care most about their own well-being. **Active buyers** value their personal safety, sexual health, and freedom from arrest (Appendix B, Figure P). Respondents were much more concerned about the risk of arrest than they were about finding a place to purchase sex where it is legal to do so. Active buyers today are clearly untroubled by breaking the law but preoccupied by a desire to avoid getting caught by the authorities.

Buyers say other factors need to be in place for them to purchase sex; one is that the prostituted person they buy should “not be forced or trafficked.” This finding can be interpreted several ways. It could indicate a fear of severe criminal penalties associated with getting caught, a desire not to harm a “forced or trafficked” person, or a combination of both impulses.

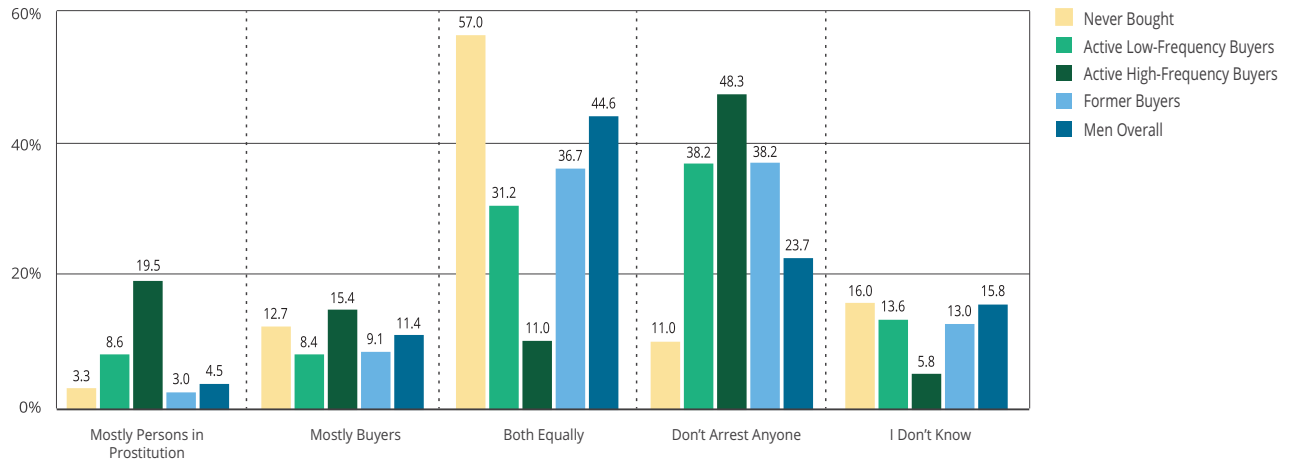
**Active buyers** and **former buyers** are much more likely than **non-buyers** to say police “should not arrest anyone” involved in prostitution (Figure 25), demonstrating that the greatest source of support among men for legalizing the US sex trade comes from buyers themselves. About one in five **active high-frequency buyers** believe police should arrest “mostly persons in prostitution” compared to “mostly johns” or “both, equally.”

**Non-buyers**, on the other hand, overwhelmingly believe police should arrest buyers and prostituted persons “equally.”

Active buyers are less likely to believe that people in prostitution are “forced or lured into the trade,” and say that prostituted persons “choose it as a profession.”

FIGURE 25

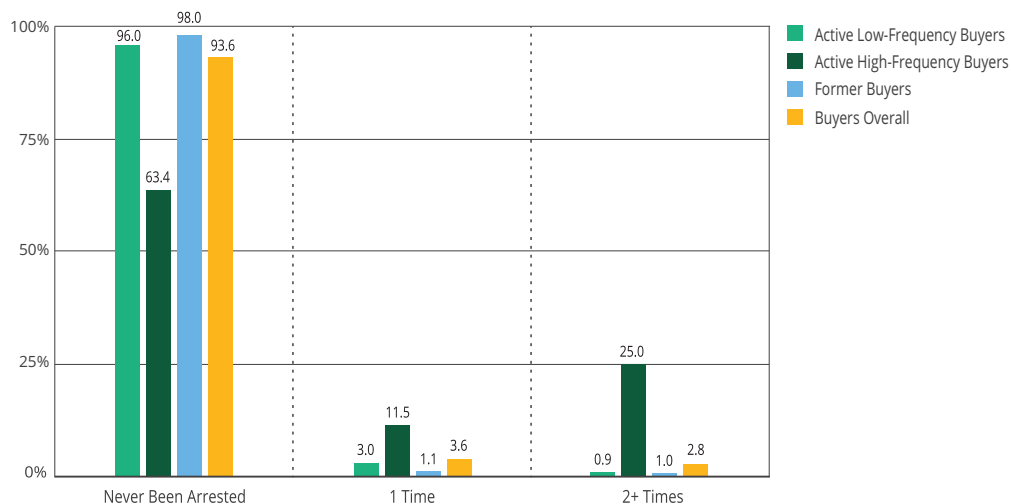
### “Who should your local police focus on arresting to combat prostitution?”



When we look at buyers' actual experiences with law enforcement, it becomes much easier to understand why few of them perceive a real risk of arrest. Only about 6% of men who purchase sex illegally have ever been arrested for it (Figure 26). **Active high-frequency buyers** are six times as likely to have been arrested for sex buying; two-thirds of them report having been arrested multiple times for the same offense. The survey does not provide insight into whether a subsequent arrest led to heightened penalties or was even recognized as a repeat offense by the law enforcement agency.

FIGURE 26

### Sex Buying Arrest History



Respondents indicated that when they do perceive a risk of arrest, it can lead them to alter their activities (Figure 27). **Active high-frequency buyers** are more sensitive than **active low-frequency buyers** to police presence, and are more likely to shift their buying behavior in response. About one-quarter of these buyers “strongly agree” that “the risk of arrest is so high I might stop” (Figure 28).

FIGURE 27

“Have you ever stopped buying sex in one area because of police presence?”

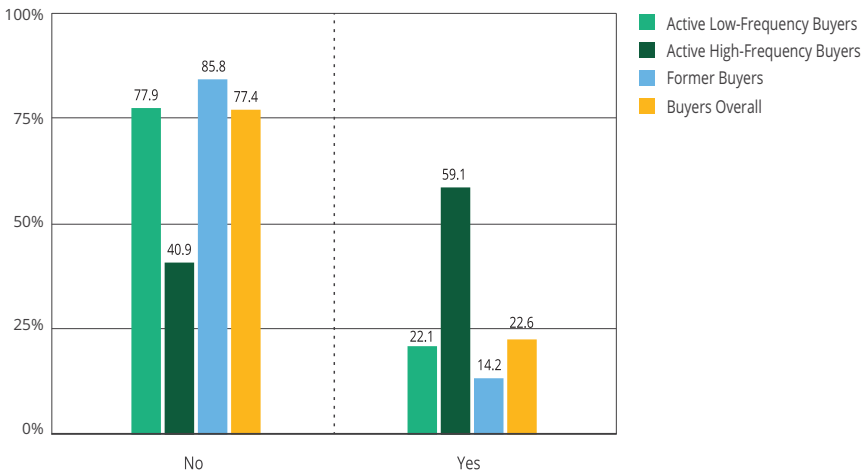
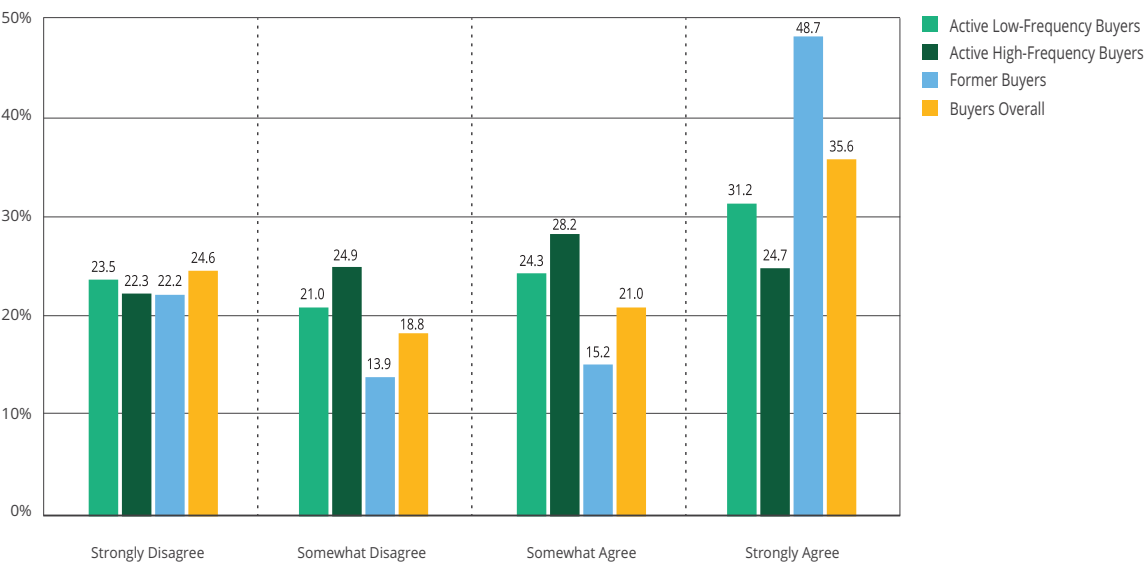


FIGURE 28

“The risk of getting arrested for buying sex is so high that I am considering not buying sex again.”



These findings demonstrate that mitigating sex buying at the individual and system levels is possible, but complex. Many disparate forces act to increase and decrease sex-buyer behavior, leading us to try and document the interplay among them. In the next section, we summarize the results of an advanced statistical procedure designed to achieve exactly this goal.

## A SYSTEM OF ACCELERANT AND DECELERANT INFLUENCES ON SEX BUYING

Practitioners and policymakers who seek to stop sex buying must understand why men increase (accelerate) or decrease (decelerate) this harmful behavior. Our survey contains questions that we've shown track closely to different types of sex-buying patterns. Using an advanced statistical procedure called Structural Equation Modeling (SEM),<sup>7</sup> we can test many of these associations simultaneously to explore overarching frameworks that best describe our data.

The full, detailed presentation of this SEM analysis is contained in Appendix Figure Q, including model fit statistics. Below we've summarized two major areas of critically important findings.

The first major conclusion is that the main driver, or accelerant, of sex buying is “normalized beliefs” about the commercial sex trade. This ideology is represented by interrelated beliefs: prostituted people enjoy the act, prostitution is mostly a victimless crime, buyers are merely taking care of their needs, and buyers are just “guys being guys.” In Figure 29 we see that normalized beliefs are associated with an increase in sexual promiscuity—which in this analysis includes greater odds of cheating on a spouse/partner and believing the activity can be okay, as well as an increased likelihood of having contracted a sexually transmitted infection recently. Normalized beliefs reinforce self-preservation motives in sex buying—the extent to which a buyer prioritizes his own physical safety, sexual health, and freedom from arrest.

FIGURE 29

### The Acceleration Process Leading to Sex Buying

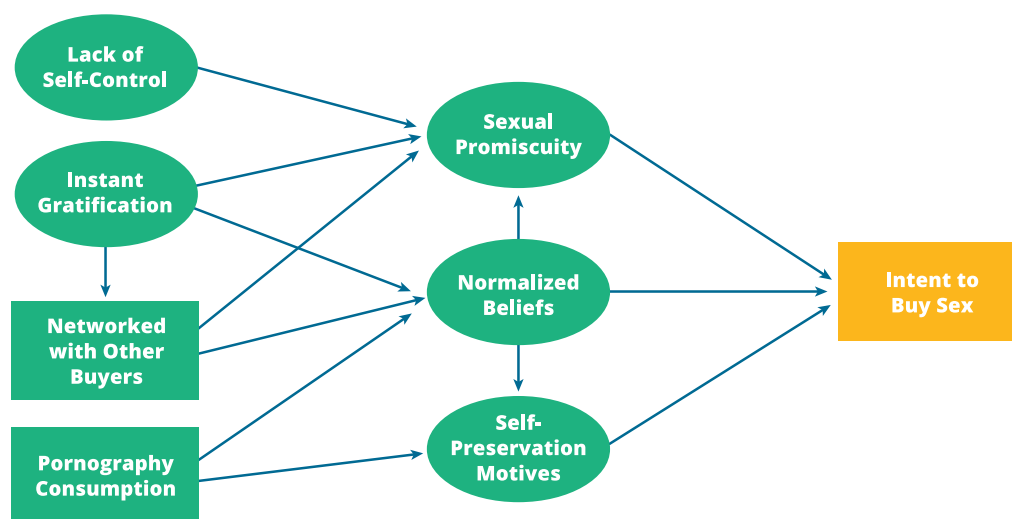


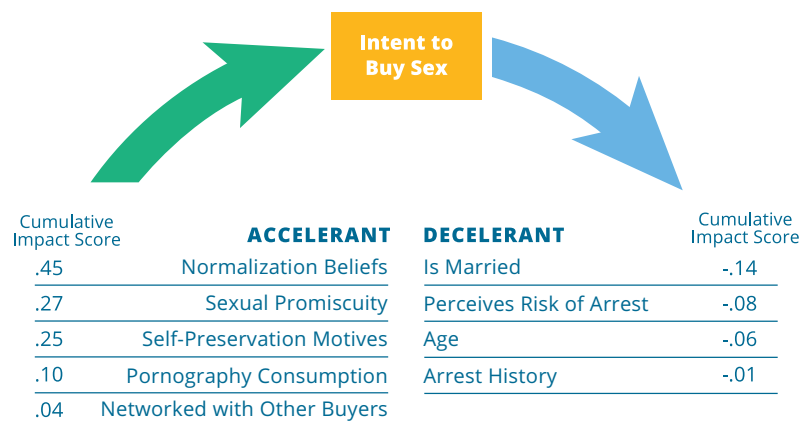
Figure 29 demonstrates factors that influence normalized beliefs, including lack of impulse control, being networked with other sex buyers, and consuming pornography. While not depicted in this figure, we also find that age is associated with normalized belief systems, suggesting that views about the sex trade become calcified in a buyer's ideology over time.

<sup>7</sup> SEM is a family of procedures, and many quantitative researchers will be familiar with an early version of SEM known as path analysis. Indeed, the results of most SEM analyses can be displayed in path diagrams, as we have done here. SEM's limitations are similar to those of any other regression or correlation-based analysis. The underlying data are cross-sectional, and the study design is nonexperimental; thus, causality cannot be proven by any analysis in this report, including through SEM. While exploratory in nature, the SEM results do provide a useful framework for developing further research studies to study some of these complex relationships in closer detail.

One of the major advantages of SEM as an analysis method is not just the ability to order these different forces in an overarching framework, but then to compare the magnitude of these forces, or effects, against each other. Through this process, which is summarized in Figure 30, we find that normalized beliefs have the strongest impact on accelerating sex-buying behavior. These “cumulative impact scores” are, for those familiar with SEM, the total effects (direct plus indirect effects) on the model’s endogenous outcome variable, intent to buy sex. These scores do not have any *absolute* meaning, but they do have *relative* meaning; a score of .20 is twice as strong as a score of .10, for instance.

FIGURE 30

Accelerants and Decelerants of Sex-Buying Intent



Just as we can map out sex-buying accelerant relationships, we can do the same for decelerant relationships, leading to the second major finding. Figure 31 highlights the criminal justice system’s role in reducing sex buying. Perceiving a risk of arrest has a *diminishing effect* (dotted line) on sex buying. Two factors increase the perception of risk: a buyer’s own arrest history, and the extent to which a buyer shifts his paid sex activity to other communities in response to police presence. This pattern suggests that cracking down on sex buying in one community, while it will certainly push some activity to neighboring areas, will also reinforce in those buyers’ minds that they face a plausible risk of arrest.

FIGURE 31

The Deceleration Process of Reducing Sex Buying



Other decelerant factors not shown in this figure include age and marital status. As buyers get older, they are less likely to engage in paid sex activity. This is a strong, direct relationship, but carries a major caveat. Because buyer age *increases* the calcification of normalized beliefs, this accelerant almost completely offsets the slowing down of sex buying that we would otherwise expect to see as a buyer “ages out” of the market.

Buyers who are married (not just those involved in a romantic relationship) tend to buy sex at reduced rates compared to their unmarried counterparts. Recall that despite this decelerant effect, over one-third of **active buyers** are married.

Across these decelerant effects, one thing should be obvious for practitioners and policymakers alike: the strongest realistic opportunity to reduce sex-buying behavior in the short-term, and thus shrink the demand-side of the commercial sex market, is to focus on strategies that increase the *perception of arrest risk* among buyers. This involves much more than just individual arrests.

## CONCLUSION

The analyses in this report raise as many questions as they answer, but nonetheless represent a major leap forward in our understanding of how sex buying flourishes, and how it might diminish. Buyers form a diverse group of men, with some far more entrenched in the market than others. They are less united by demographics than by the beliefs they hold. Changing sex-buying behavior in the long term is largely, though not exclusively, about altering these destructive belief systems. The criminal justice system also plays an important role in influencing buyer behavior through the perception of risk, and by helping to counter the injurious false narrative held by many buyers that buying sex is normal, harmless, and acceptable. We summarize the implications of these findings for policymakers in the next and final section of the report.

Perceiving a risk of arrest has a diminishing effect on sex buying.

## PART IV

# Policy Recommendations

This study illuminates several areas for policy change designed to reduce demand for commercial sex, including sex trafficking, and by extension reduce victimization rates. Not only can federal, state, and local public policy improve, but organizations and institutions of any size can also implement changes.

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### A SMARTER CRIMINAL JUSTICE APPROACH

The data show that buyers are sensitive to the risk of arrest, cite it as a barrier to sex buying, and stop buying sex in communities where they perceive a higher likelihood of arrest. Obviously not every buyer can be—or even needs to be—arrested for the criminal justice response to have a significant impact on reducing demand.

State and local law enforcement agencies, which are primarily responsible for enforcing laws against sex buying, must be strategic. Arresting prostituted persons does nothing to deter buyers. In fact, the very presence of prostituted persons is a direct response to demand, not the other way around. The data demonstrate that we can deter illicit commercial sex markets by arresting sex buyers as part of a broader strategy to increase perceptions of risk.

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#### 1 | RECOMMENDATION

Shift law enforcement's finite resources from arresting and adjudicating prostituted persons and towards arresting and adjudicating buyers.

When law enforcement agencies engage in demand-reduction operations, they should:

- Publicize the operations widely so that the entire community is aware that demand is a priority for the agency, and that there is an ongoing plausible risk of arrest for men who attempt to buy sex. This study documents the central importance of the *perception* of risk of arrest in deterring buyers and would-be buyers. The publicity needed to heighten risk perception is not for shaming individual arrestees—a strategy known to be ineffective, as well as detrimental to families and communities (McAlinden, 2005). Publicity can take the form of earned media coverage and social media outreach after successful operations, and even *before and while* operations take place. This publicity deterrence model is widely used in combating DUI criminality, where it is an evidence-based practice known to reduce intoxicated driving rates.
- Conduct demand operations that mirror the diversity of venues, including buyer stings conducted online; in fake illicit massage brothels, apartment brothels, and high-end “escort” agencies; and on known street corridors (as long as the street operations do not require police to first arrest prostituted persons). Conducting a range of demand operations ensures that criminal accountability applies equally to the diverse spectrum of buyers within a community.
- Use investigative data to identify and build cases against high-frequency buyers, as well as buyers who advertise their exploits to the larger community to bolster the activity. With limited resources,



law enforcement agencies must always focus on the highest-impact offenders. Our study makes clear that a relatively small percentage of buyers account for most market activity.

- Ensure law enforcement has the information and data-sharing protocols in place to identify which arrested buyers are recidivists. Many self-identified buyers in this study report being arrested for sex buying on multiple occasions, yet law enforcement professionals indicate that arrestees commonly say it's "their first time."

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## 2 | RECOMMENDATION

Make available federal short-term funding programs to support state and local law enforcement agencies ready to make demand-reduction reforms.

A shift in law enforcement practice requires training and other professional resources to support new protocols. Financial support for this does not need to be long term; the costs of demand operations should be offset in part by reduced investment in arrests previously targeted at prostituted persons. Training on cost-efficient demand operation approaches, especially those pioneered by leading law enforcement agencies, will also help drive down operations costs for agencies that are new to the practice. Training and technical assistance for law enforcement demand operations is currently available through the National Johns Suppression Initiative (NJSI). For more information on NJSI: [www.cookcountysheriff.org/tag/national-johns-suppression-initiative/](http://www.cookcountysheriff.org/tag/national-johns-suppression-initiative/)

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## 3 | RECOMMENDATION

Implement mandatory minimum fines of adjudicated buyers to help offset costs of survivor exit services, effective long-term buyer education programs, and law enforcement demand operations.

While mandatory minimum fines of convicted buyers can fund operations, it is just as important—if not more important—that these fines support victim and “exit” services for prostituted persons, including trafficking victims. Not only does this strategy help ensure sustainable funding for such services, but our data demonstrate how it is needed to reinforce the corrective message that sex-buying harms prostituted persons. This message is best delivered through effective long-term sex buyer education programs, which should be mandated as a condition of adjudication rather than as a diversion alternative

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## 4 | RECOMMENDATION

Create increasingly severe penalty structures for repeat buyers, while ensuring that sanctions are consistent with the nature of the offense and not unfairly punitive.

Lawmakers should ensure that state and local laws against sex buying consider the reality of recidivists by assessing increasingly severe penalties. Such laws should also contemplate the uniquely negative impact of “promoting buyers,” people who introduce others into the sex trade (especially juveniles) or post public content about their exploits to encourage other men to buy sex. Our findings show how “promoting buyers” are central to the generational cascade of sex-buying behavior. State and local sex buying laws, as well as pimping and trafficking laws, generally were not authored with the reality of “promoting buyers” in mind, leaving prosecutors with ill-fitting options for charging such defendants.

## ENGAGING ALLIES IN CULTURAL INTERVENTIONS

While the criminal justice system is most readily suited to “decelerate” demand, it is hardly the only sector that can serve an important role. The “normalization culture” underlying sex-buying behavior presents a wide range of opportunities for organizations and institutions to address head-on the driving ideologies behind demand. Education, health, and business sectors can be key allies in strategic cultural interventions to reduce demand, since the data in this study make clear that buyers try to hide their behavior from others.

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### 5 | RECOMMENDATION

#### Counter messages that normalize sex buying through interventions in education and public health sectors.

Buyers cocoon themselves in networks and subcultures that reinforce the “normalization” of sex buying; other networks and cultural influencers must directly and actively counter this narrative. It is critical to challenge the demonstrably false notions that sex buying is both a victimless crime and normal male sexual behavior. The data here show how this belief system is the root justification for most men who buy sex.

- Bystander intervention strategies should be developed and deployed—especially for young adult audiences—to teach safe and practical ways to challenge these false narratives within peer networks. Training strategies are already being used to great success in sexual assault prevention programs on college campuses and elsewhere. Discussions on the topics of consent, sexual harm, and relationship power differentials should be extended into the issue area of commercial sex.
- Survivor voices are critically important to educate the public, including would-be buyers, on the magnitude and nature of harms caused by sex buying. Survivors’ authentic voices are essential to countering the victimless crime mythology these data show is internalized by many men.
- School-based sexual education is essential in reducing demand over the long term, especially since we have learned through this study that many men start buying sex at a young age. Programs for early adolescents can help young people understand the harms and non-normative nature of sex buying and other forms of gender-based violence as outlined below.

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### 6 | RECOMMENDATION

#### Create employer policies prohibiting sex buying.

Buyers are represented across all demographic groups of men, and high-frequency buyers are more likely to have higher incomes. Therefore, every business or organization should state explicitly within its code of conduct that buying sex is prohibited, including activities on company time or with company resources that are related to sex buying. Such policies should provide clear and specific consequences for employees caught buying sex, including relaying the incident to local authorities under mandated reporter protocol—acknowledging that the prostituted person is potentially an adult or juvenile trafficking victim.

## 7 | RECOMMENDATION

### Implement targeted prevention campaigns and focus deterrence communications on behavioral “nudges.”

These interventions are designed to encourage small changes in *positive* behaviors through careful suggestion and strategic presentation of choice sets which are optimized based on how humans process information and make decisions. When implemented at scale, these small changes can accrue major social impact. Behavioral nudge opportunities to reduce demand could include:

- **Targeted deterrence and prevention campaigns that focus on how much “safer” it is for men to engage in consensual relational sex compared to buying sex.** The data in this report show that buyers are primarily motivated by their own concerns for well-being and strategically downplay the possibility that prostituted people are harmed. Therefore, the behavioral nudge calculus must be expressed in terms of payoff to the buyer despite the inclination to focus on the harm caused to others. Nudge campaigns might also focus on how relational sex is normal, easier, and more satisfying than paying for sex.
- **Scalable communications programs, especially those deployed digitally, that focus on nudging men away from exploitative sexual experiences that are highly correlated with sex buying.** Our study finds that such experiences include frequenting strip clubs, consuming pornography, and cheating on a romantic partner. For instance, web search ads could provide plausible, healthy sexual alternatives to boys and men searching for these experiences. Additionally, media partners could encourage portrayals that reflect these experiences more accurately, documenting not just the harm caused to exploited persons, but also the dissatisfaction and regret that many men—as shown in this study—experience after they purchase sex.
- **Contributions from the health sector, which can help reduce demand on multiple fronts.** Violence against women is a public health issue, and sex buying is a form of gender-based violence that registers significant amounts of traumatic harm to an overwhelming majority of prostituted individuals. Preventing this harm altogether is the fundamental aim of demand reduction. As it has done for sexual assault, intoxicated driving, and many other issues, the public health sector can identify and promote evidence-based practices in reducing demand. The data in this study suggest ample opportunity for testing targeted community interventions.
- **Involvement of physicians and mental health counselors.** Related to the need for public health involvement is a practical consideration: sex buying is a risky activity. This study identifies serious risks for experiencing physical violence, contracting sexually transmitted infections, and other health concerns—not counting the health effects caused by buyers to relational partners and prostituted persons. Physicians and mental health counselors should understand sex buying as a behavior that, among other things, threatens the health and well-being of the buyer.

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## Appendix A | Previous Approaches to Studying Sex Buyers

Since the 1990s, numerous studies have attempted to correct the imbalanced focus on “supply” over “demand” in prostitution research, and have improved our understanding of sex buyers. Knowledge about these buyers comes primarily from three methodologies: (1) comparing samples of buyers with the general population, (2) comparing buyers who attend educational programs (“john schools”), subsequent to their arrest, with men in the general population, and (3) using surveys to compare buyers who admit engaging in the behavior to those who do not (Brewer, Muth, & Potterat, 2008). While each of these approaches has methodological limitations, they have produced stable findings about buyers and the market. One major conclusion, which runs contrary to sensationalized media reports, is that the prevalence of sex buying is dropping. Analysis of General Social Survey data between 1991-1996 and 2006-2012 indicates the number of men in the US who have ever bought sex has decreased from 17% to 13.2% (Reyes, 2013).

One major theoretical framework for understanding this data derives from social exchange theory, which has been used to explain sexual behavior broadly, especially partner selection. Generally, this theory draws on economic principles by emphasizing the exchange of material or symbolic resources between people, labeling costs (exchanges that result in loss or punishment), rewards (pleasurable exchanges), and reciprocity. There are multiple kinds of exchange theory, but they share three core assumptions: (1) all social interactions are a kind of social exchange, (2) people seek to maximize their rewards and minimize costs, and (3) when individuals receive rewards, they feel compelled to reciprocate (Sprecher, 1998).

Applied to the commercial sex market, exchange theory posits that when relational, non-commercial sex is viewed as more costly than commercial sex, a buyer will deem prostitution more “cost-efficient” and rewarding. As an explanatory model, social exchange theory obviously falls flat. If sex buying were merely an attempt by men to achieve sexual “cost efficiencies,” then a reasonable person would expect all or most men to have paid for sex at least once in their lifetimes, and the prevalence of sex buyers cross-culturally would be nearly identical. According to multiple studies (Ward et al., 2005; Claude, 2010; Axel Månsson, 2004; Shih, 1994; Shively, Wheeler & Hunt, 2012), neither of these findings comes close to holding true.

Another debated framework for understanding buyer behavior is whether these men should fall under a category of “peculiar man” (Farley, 2007; Raymond 2004; Sandell, Pettersson, Larsson, & Kuosmanen, 1996; Vanwesenbeeck, Graaf, Zessen, Straver, & Visser, 1993; Månsson & Linders, 1984) or “every man” (Monto & Milrod, 2013; Pitts, Smith, Grierson, O'Brien, & Misson, 2004). The “every man” narrative is an artifact of Kinsey's early studies of sexuality (Xantidis & McCabe, 2000). Kinsey's research claimed that 69% of American men bought sex at least once in their lifetimes, which led to a hypothesis that sex buying is biologically determined. Kinsey relied on deeply flawed samples of men, undermining most of his findings on sex buying. Yet, the notion that sex buying reflects normative male sexuality has remained pervasive. More recent research on its prevalence raised serious challenges to this claim (Monto 2004).

Monto and McRee (2005) found buyers and non-buyers do not differ significantly in demographic variables, such as age, education, marital status, length of time in relationship, presence of a regular partner, number of children, or occupation. They did find sex buyers were less likely to take on a feminine sex-role orientation and lower social-sexual effectiveness, indicating there may be a level of relational difficulty underlying some sex-buying behavior. Analyzing men attending weekend “john schools,” Xantidis and McCabe (2000) found buyers were less likely than non-buyers to be married, be happily married, or be happy in general. They also found buyers were more likely to think about sex and engage in other aspects of the commercial sex industry, plus less likely to think the commercial sex industry is morally wrong.

Weitzer (2009) proposed a “polymorphous paradigm” that would bridge disparate approaches to understanding the commercial sex market as characterized by varied forms of power relationships and experiences. While the polymorphous paradigm captures the diverse experiences of prostituted persons without engaging in reductionism, it highlights an important point: the sex market is always a buyer’s market. That term reflects an organization of power dynamics that shapes prostitution transactions in favor of the purchaser.

The circumstances and situations that bring buyers into the sex market are not mediated by the same troublesome influences such as poverty, housing instability, employment opportunities, and traumatic histories that tend to shape prostituted persons’ circumstances. In other words, buyers and sellers do not generally come from equivalent material conditions. Weitzer’s (2009) polymorphous paradigm helped change the trajectory of prostitution scholarship toward a more balanced, encompassing approach, but it does not offer an explanation of buyer behavior.

Sex buying can also be understood through “deviance” frameworks, in two ways: socially deviant, because it is an illegal activity,<sup>8</sup> and gender deviant, as a demonstrably uncommon masculine behavior. Agnew’s (1992) general strain theory identifies three major types of strain that can help explain how sex buying occurs as a masculine, gender-deviant behavior: 1) strain experienced by individuals due to real or anticipated failures in achieving non-deviant goals, causing the person to perceive his only real choices are deviant ones; 2) strain caused by removing positive forces or elements, and 3) strain caused by the introduction of negative forces or elements. These strains create pressure to choose among deviant forms of coping. Broidy and Agnew (1997) even analyzed strain theory in terms of gender and crime, suggesting this framework can be a helpful way to understand why many crimes manifest differently in men and women.

Indeed, Bucher, Manasse, and Milton (2015) found that sex buying can serve as a behavioral coping mechanism to fulfill basic goals like companionship, excitement, and a sexual outlet for men who feel blocked from achieving sexual satisfaction. The authors note this pattern fits with a highly gendered type of strain, whereby certain notions of masculinity are driven by sexual prowess and gendered power dynamics in which men are expected to exert control over their environment. Failing to achieve these expectations can produce a strain that threatens some men’s identities; they turn to sex buying to correct it.

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8 Sex buying is illegal in the US, in all but a few counties in Nevada.

FIGURE A

Respondents Who Have Ever Paid for Sex

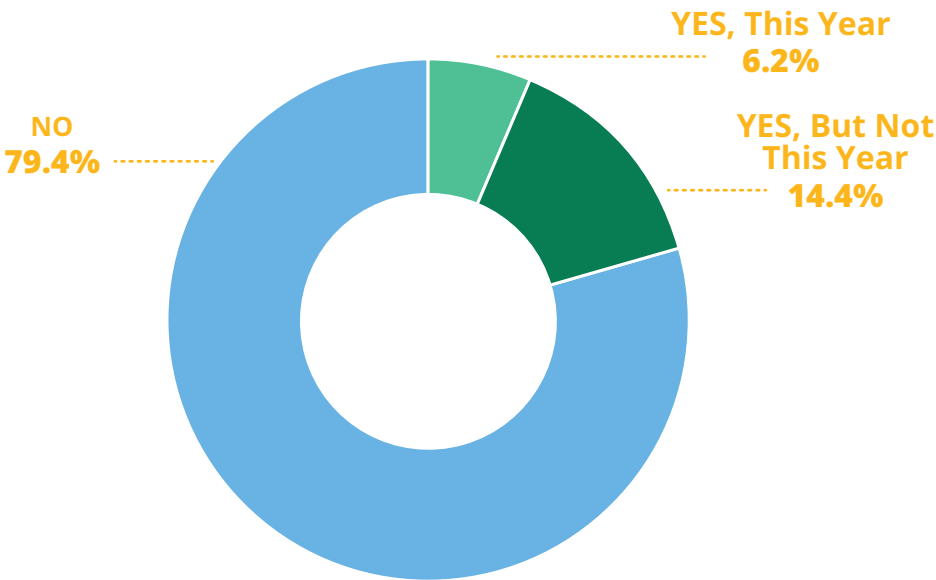


FIGURE B

Number of Times Buyers Paid for Sex in Their Lifetimes

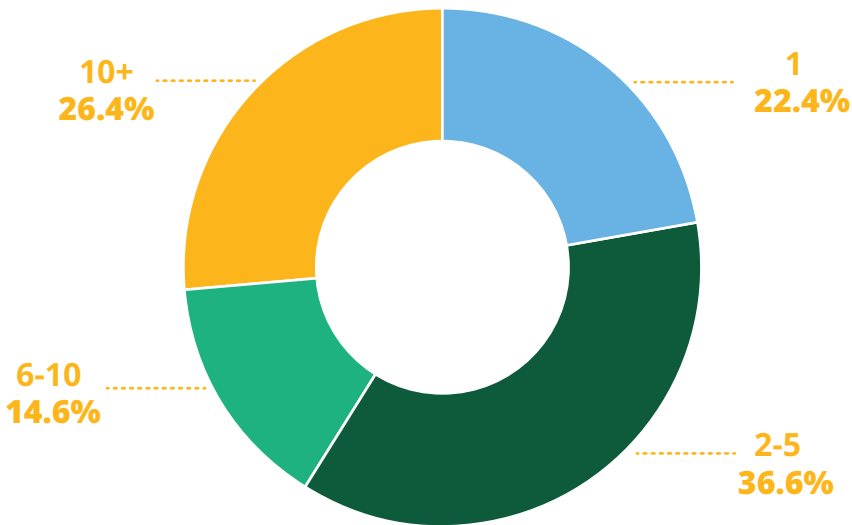




FIGURE C

### Buyer's Age of First Paid Sex Experience

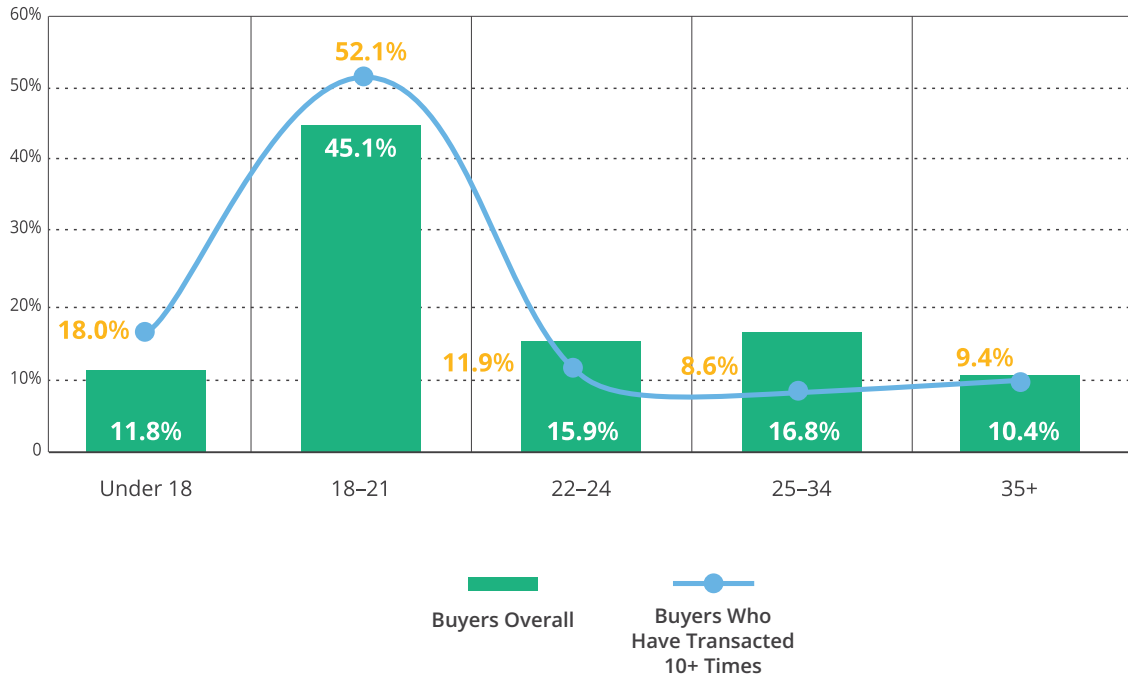


FIGURE D

### Estimated Age of Prostituted Person Most Recently Bought for Sex, According to Buyer

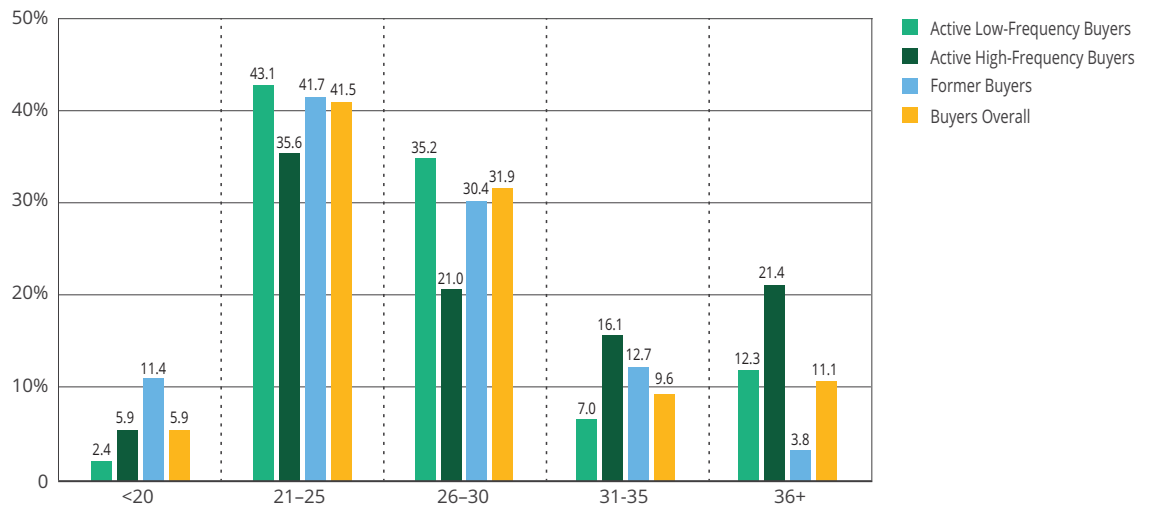


FIGURE E

### Perceived Race/Ethnicity of Prostituted Person Most Recently Bought for Sex, According to Buyer

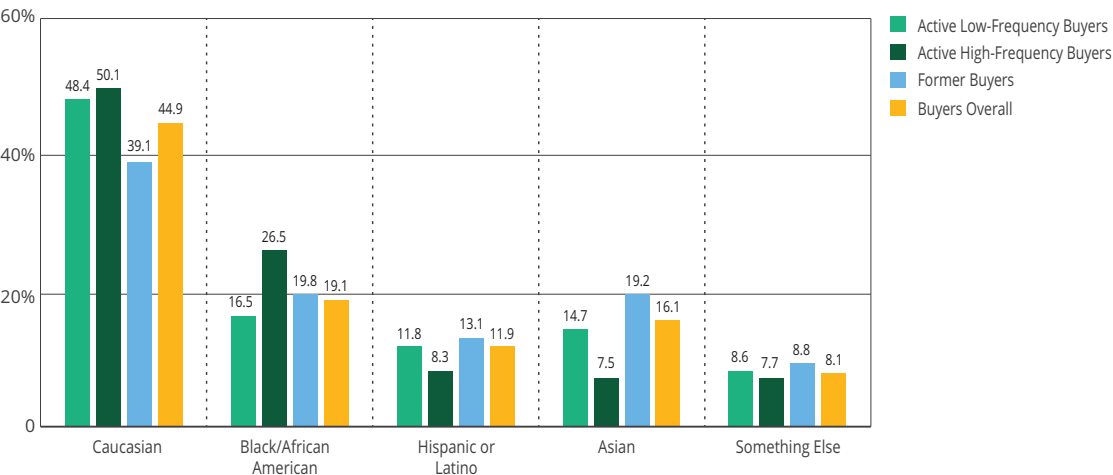


FIGURE F

### Gender of Prostituted Person Most Recently Bought for Sex, According to Buyer

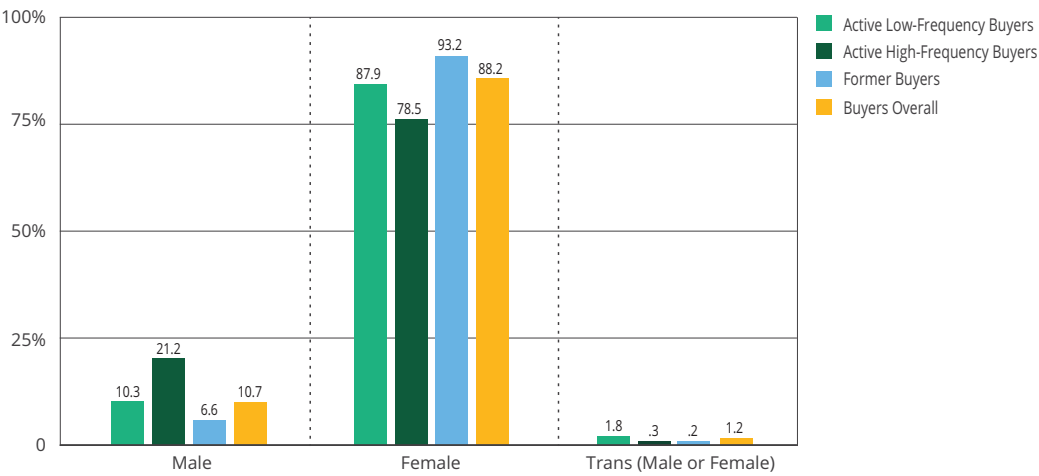


FIGURE G

### Number of Times Active Buyers Paid for Sex in the Last 12 Months

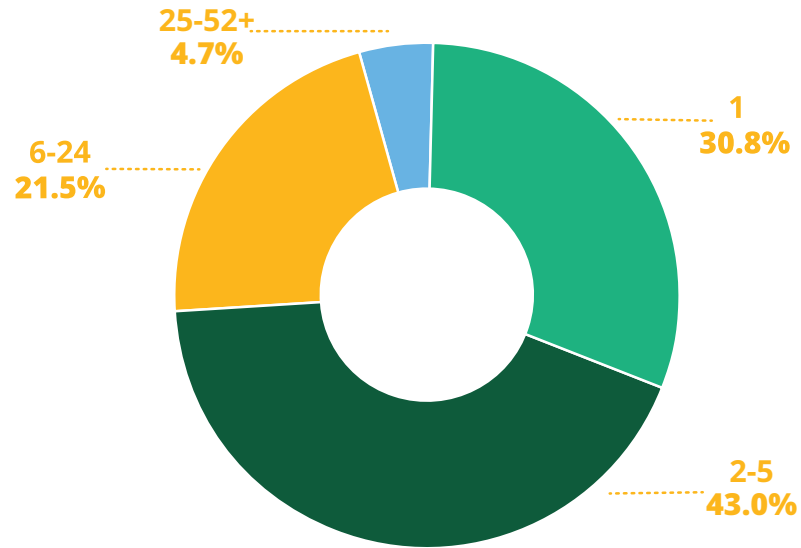


FIGURE H

### Race of Respondents

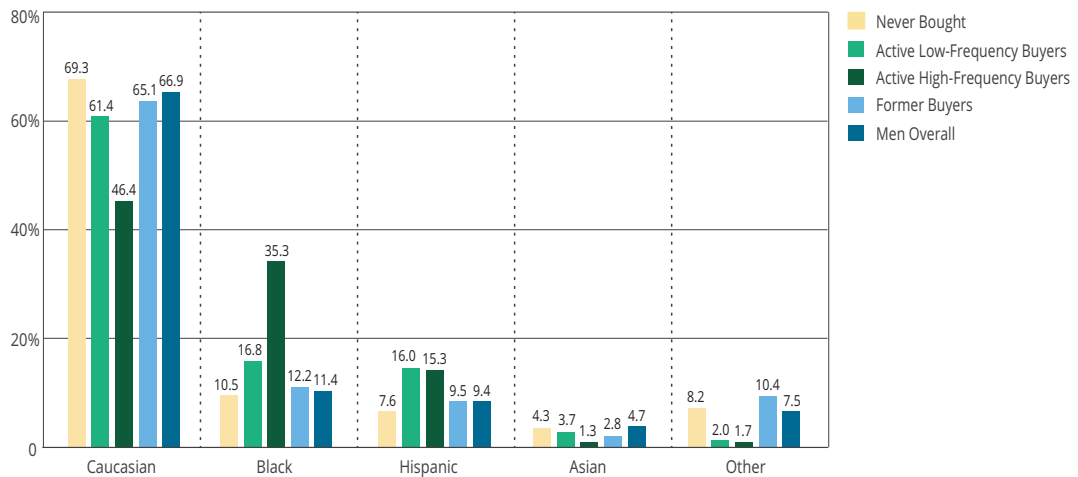


FIGURE I

## Sexual Orientation of Respondents

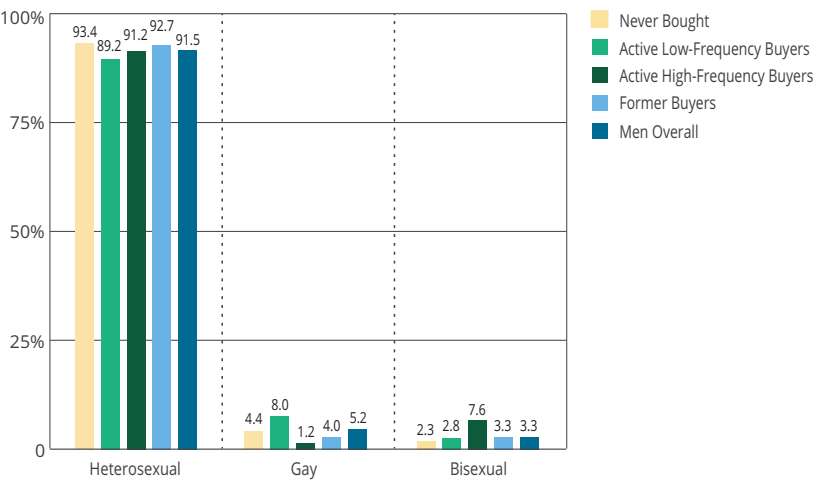


FIGURE J

## Marital Status of Respondents

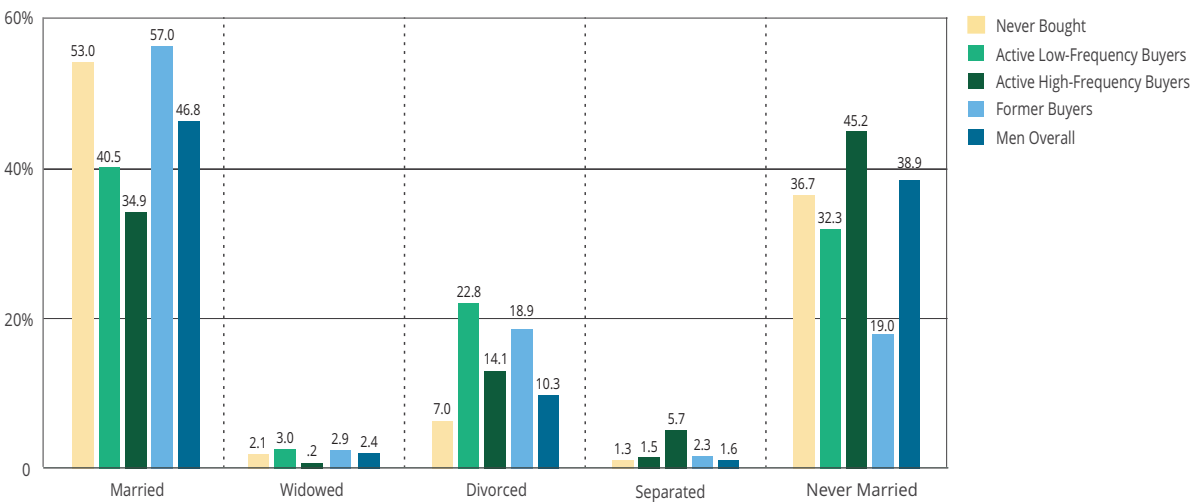


FIGURE K

## Number of Children in the Respondent's Household

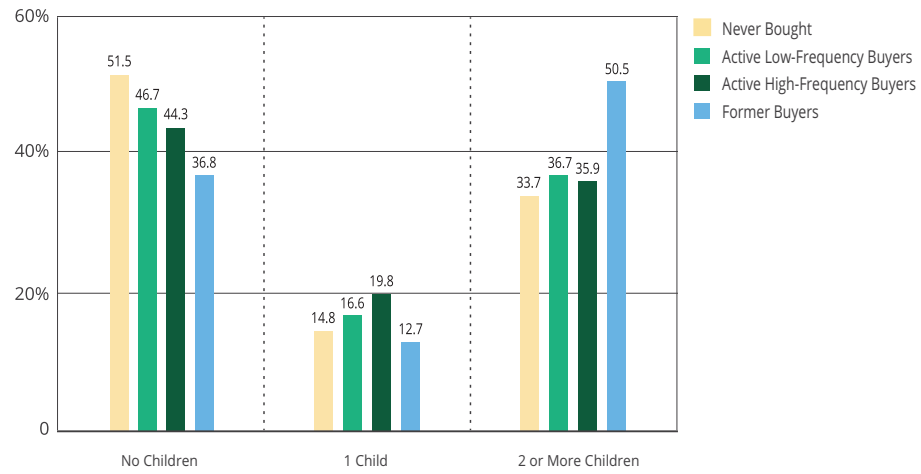


FIGURE L

## Education Attained by Respondents

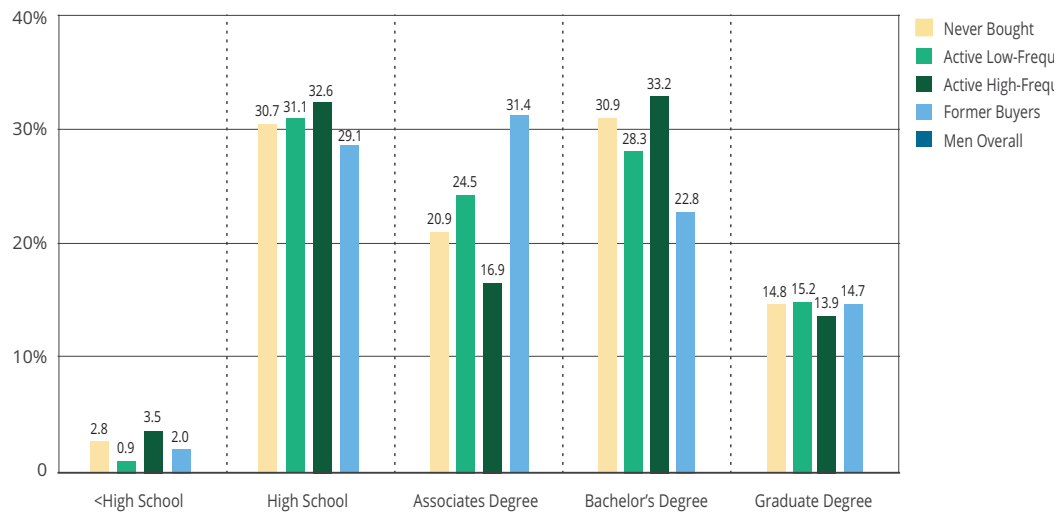


FIGURE M

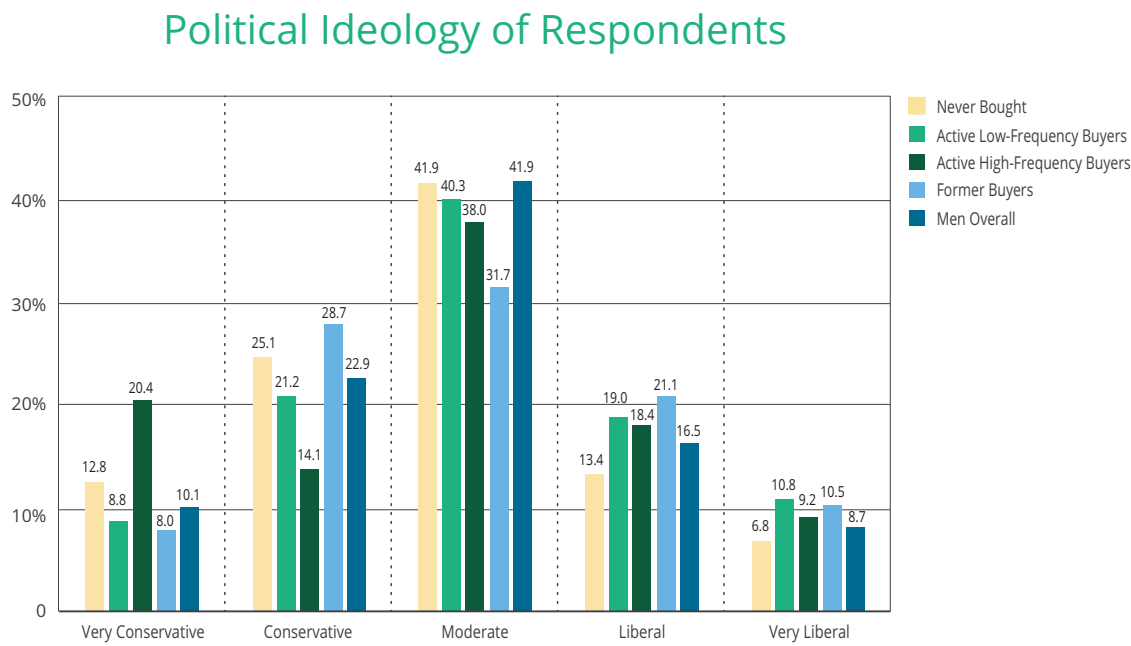


FIGURE N

### Respondents' Frequency of Having Sex in Past 12 Months

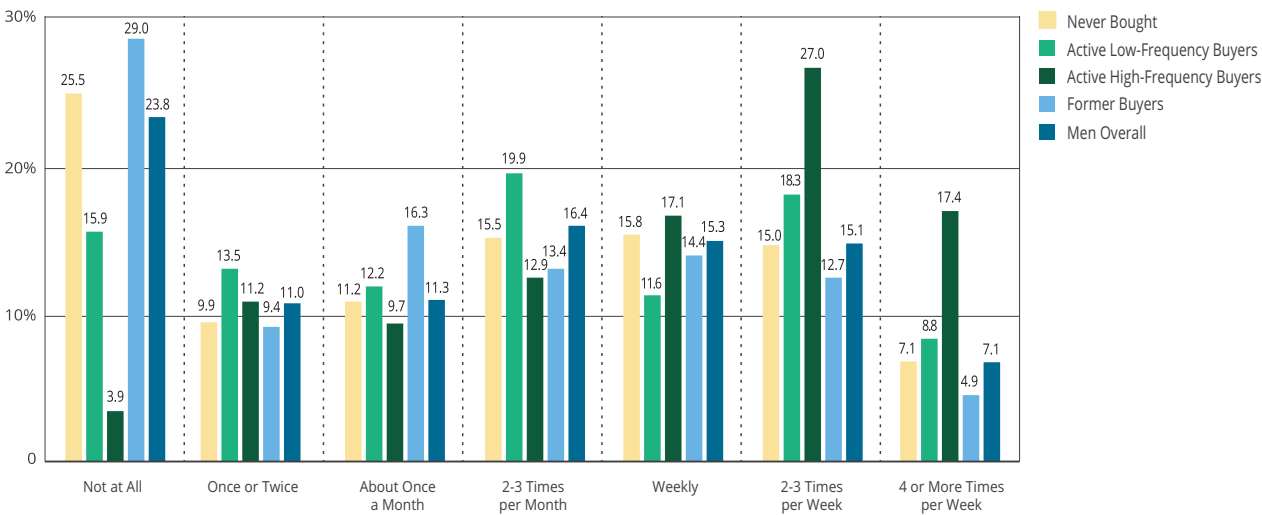


FIGURE O

## Respondents Diagnosed with Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs) in Past 12 Months

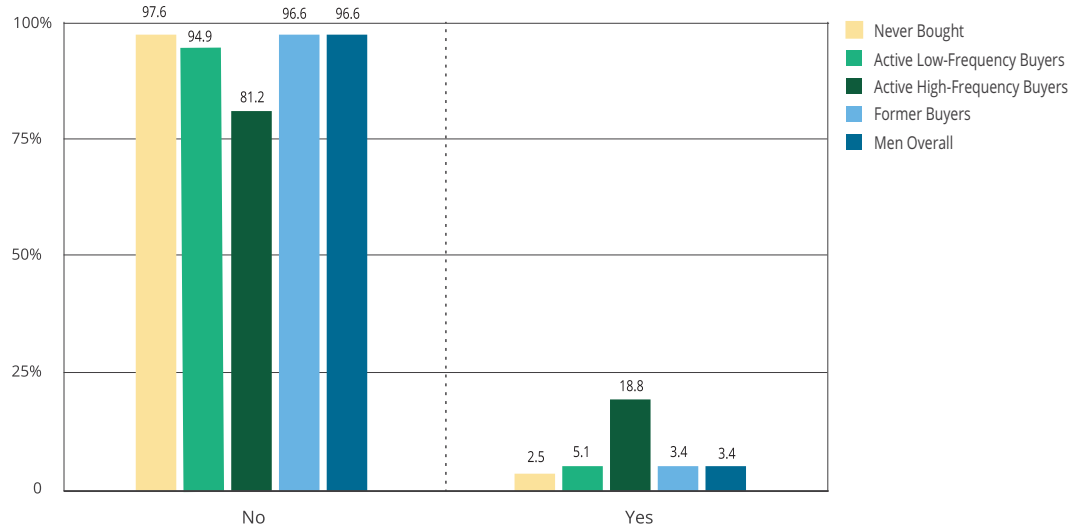
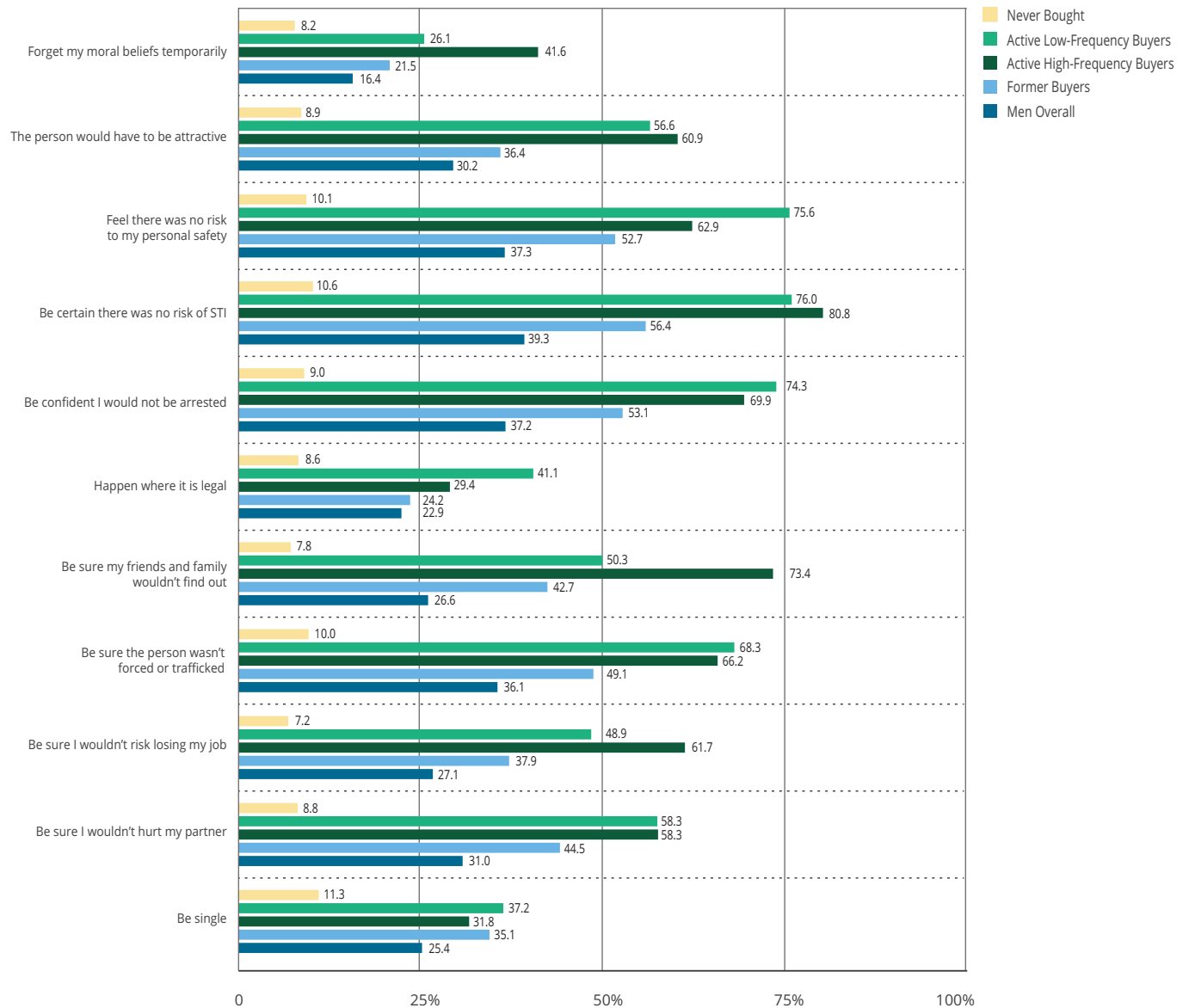


FIGURE P

## What Respondents Say Would Be Very Important Factors in Deciding to Buy Sex











The good news...

No buyers,  
no business.

**DEMAND ABOLITION** is committed to eradicating the illegal commercial sex industry in the US by combating demand for purchased sex and increasing accountability for buyers. We embrace a multisector approach, working closely with an active network of survivor leaders, criminal justice professionals, practitioners, researchers, policymakers, corporate leaders, philanthropists, media, and others.



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